Animating Absent Archives: Navigating the Political Geographies of (Extra)Partial Pasts in Historical Research

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Introduction

Archival research can often be thought of as a technique belonging to the field of historical geography. Indeed, in this subfield, archives are often essential in understanding past relationships between people, space and place, where there is an *absence* of other methodological possibilities (for example speaking to people directly, who may no longer be living) (Craggs 2016; Hannam 2001). 'The archive' thus provides the ability to speak *with* in other ways, through the fragments of materials left behind: from letters, records, photographs, memos, meeting minutes but also audio and video sources. Indeed, archives still involve a conversation but with a variety of people via a medium that the researcher enters into a dialogue with. Yet as the large literature on archives reveals, although often spoken of in the singular (as 'the archive'), archive*s* are multiple. They exist in many guises, most simply, as repositories of information that exist in the present, for people to use in the present (and future), in capturing (partial) pasts. Their multiplicity can be captured in the fact that archives can be national (for example state records, therefore linking quite directly to political shifts and turns in a country's history), as well as regional, local or even personal (a collation of belongings of an individual).

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They can be 'official' (state sanctioned collections) and 'private' (relating to businesses or organisations), and they can be clearly catalogued and organised by an archivist, or rather more illogical (piles of material loosely arranged) (see Ogborn 2003, p. 12). Indeed, it is this variation that makes them political. What is kept, by whom, where and for what reason? As Ogborn writes "[w]hat has been gathered and why? What has been kept and archived? What is open for consultation?" (2003, p. 13). These are political questions.

It is also the extent of material—reams of accounting details, legers, postcards, sound files or other media—which lends itself as useful across geographical sub-disciplines, to the varieties of questions those sub-disciplines ask. As Ruth Craggs notes (2016, p. 112), "[w]hether your primary focus is historic or contemporary, there is a huge range of rich sources available through which it is possible to reconstruct lives and places past". Archives are not only the tools of those categorising themselves as historical geographers: historical geography is simultaneously political (and also cultural, social, environmental and so on), and vice versa, political geography is not purely contemporary in its focus. So, almost all sub-disciplines of geography could use archives, depending on their line of query, but for political geography and geographers, archives have a special threefold potential.

First, histories constitute the very making of the discipline, here one need only think about figures who have shaped twists and turns in the development of the (our) discipline, and studies of them, to see the overlap between 'the political' and 'historical'. Think, for example, of Felix Driver's now classic text *Geography Militant* (2001) on the role of exploration and empire, to Innes Keighren's work on Ellen Semple (2010), the American Geographer and first woman president of the Association of American Geographers. Keighren's work unpacks the deeply political ramifications of Semple's 'Influences of Geographic Environment' (from 1911), a text later influential in the development of what would be known as the deeply divisive theory of Environmental Determinism. Likewise, in the start of their textbook on An *Introduction to Political Geography: Space, Place and Politics*, Jones et al. (2014) dedicate a chapter to Geopolitics and Critical Geopolitics which tracks the historical development of classic geopolitics from Rudolf Kjellén (whose mentor was Fredereich Ratzel), whose own story is covered in the text's introduction. Rachael Squire and Anna Jackman's most recent textbook *Political Geography: Approaches, Concepts, Futures* (2024) also 'situates' the sub-discipline historically. Our point: Political Geography/Political Geographies have histories.

Second, the wide remit of interests that fall under the umbrella of 'political geographies' can be understood through historical engagement. Be it geopolitics (classical, banal, everyday, critical) to specific topics such as war, protest, resource conflict and territorial disputes—each of these may be examined through contemporary, or past, lenses, or both. Rachael Squire's important work on undersea geopolitics, for example, engages the historical example of the Sealab experiments in the Cold War to shine light upon both the spaces through which Cold War geopolitics were enacted (the deep sea), and to subvert classical, masculinist approaches of geopolitics by paying attention to gender, embodiment and more-than-human worlds in the articulation of politics through the US-led scheme to

create spaces of habitation underwater (see 2016, 2020, 2021). To make these claims, Squire engaged the archives on the US Sealab schemes at Scripps Institute of Oceanography. In another example, Sarah Mills' vital work on citizenship (another key 'staple' theme of political geography) has used UK Scout Association Archive to consider how ideas of preparedness against geopolitical 'threats' (2011), reproductions of the nation and notions of citizenship and belonging can be read through the biopolitical acts and practices that were part of scouting history (2013a). There are numerous other examples of interlocking historical-political work, from anticolonial naval mutinies (Davies 2019), the work of protest stickers (Awcock 2021a), military desert groups (Forsyth 2017), to transgressive politics of offshore pirate radio (Peters 2017). Our point: the political and historical are enmeshed, and the archive is a means by which research that investigates this entanglement becomes realised.

This brings us to a third way in which the historical and political interrelate: the archive itself and the very doing of political work through this medium of material (Ogborn 2003). One of the most important political aspects of archives—in view of the doing archive work—is acknowledging the partiality of archives: that they are spaces of absence because of the politics through which the archive space itself is constructed. As Craggs writes (2016, p. 120), archives ought to be "understood as sites of power and (selective) memory". As she goes on to note, these questions of the archives' partial nature mean that "many authors have now begun to focus on the archive as the subject of their research, considering how collections produce certain visions of the world, construct partial histories, and reflect the institutions concerns of those that own(ed) them". Our point: there is a growing body of work that focuses on the politics of the archive as a space in and of itself.

This chapter builds on questions of absence. It is not so much concerned with exploring absence itself and how it has come to be (as noted above by Craggs, 2016) but rather with the question of what political geographers might *do* with absence when working with the archive. It further asks what happens when working with already partial archives, in the midst of exceptional times (such as a pandemic), when access to material becomes restricted and impossible to use in its 'original' form (be it papers, documents, photos, maps, sound archives and so on)? That the archive itself is a space of absence and partiality (Mills 2013b; Hodder 2017) requires novel ways of thinking about, and then actively approaching, the politics of the past. It is now usual for geographers, in developing knowledges and understanding world-making practices and spaces, to engage creative ways of working with archives. This means not simply approaching the archive as a straightforward repository or recollection of the past that 'gives' us 'data', but a space full of 'imaginative styles of composition and expression' (Lorimer 2009, p. 267) that allow us to 'play' with historical records (Dwyer and Davies 2010, p. 89) to get what might be needed to make sense of the questions our research asks. Archives, then, far from being crusty, dusty and old, might be thought of as dynamic, political spaces. But how do we work creatively with the absences we just mentioned?

In this chapter, we aim to provide a different lens towards engaging absence, thinking of absence in the very practising of political geography. We seek to rethink how we approach representations, paying attention to the lively, mobile, voluminous political geographies we have encountered as researchers working with archives. In the process, we also consider how we might also work in creative ways beyond the archive to build historic pictures, in the absence of being able to work with archives directly. Thinking with absence, not just within the official record (where there are 'gaps' in archive collections), but also through wider methodological questions of absences in access and availability, we detail through our own research experiences, two accounts of how absence offers ways of *practicing the politics of absence.* We consider alternative ways to read and narrate political geographies that deepen our engagement with the past both socially and materially. In doing so and in offering methodological reflections from across our own archival experiences, we flesh out in this chapter the ways that we can actually navigate the political geographies of partiality, and hopefully assist others who are working with archives (and in challenging circumstances). Indeed, archival research is typically considered safe and easy in comparison with other modes of working with people (interviews, ethnographies, etc.). But we also urge that archives are subject to politics (closures, in pressing times and 'normal' times) which can make them difficult and precarious research fields.

To develop this chapter further, we firstly set out the literature that considers ways of *enlivening* the social and political through interrogating the more-than-textual ways of approaching the archive's partiality. Here, we offer an account of doing and engaging more non-representational historical geographies (Lorimer and Whatmore 2009; Slatter 2023) that are critical not just for contemporary, but historical questions of everyday political geographies and geopolitics (Colls, 2012; Woodyear and Carter 2020; Jackman et al. 2020; Sharp 2021). We then turn to accounts of our research. Drawing upon projects undertaken with the Wirral Archives, UK, to explore how political geographies of the past may be researched amidst absence, we first propose the methodological approach of 'digging deeper' in records to enliven the very mobile, motionful and animated aspects of the past that shaped the political geographies at place that are held in the records. Secondly, we propose that when the archive is incomplete or inaccessible, the practical approach of 'finding fillers' can be embraced, whereby other modes of reading the record become possible, through other sources related to the record, i.e. newspaper articles. Together then, we offer a way of navigating historical work that animates absent archives and provides a toolkit for political geographers working with the past. Finally, we argue that the challenges presented by exceptional events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and also further instances of facing absence beyond the archive's 'usual' absences, may offer generative ways for geographers to think differently about styles of data navigation that have the potential to unlock more eclectic methodological approaches going forward.

More-Than-Textual Enlivenings Amidst Absence: Setting the Scene

Geographers and their engagements with archives have pointed out the archive "can often appear to be a collection of unorganized papers that give little sign or notice to the socio-spatial context in which their contents actually came to be" (Hammond 2020, p. 204). Often, the meaning of particular documents, rather than being found solely in their contents, is often in their relationship to one another, whereby "politics is always more than words and texts" (Medby and Throrton 2023, p. 4). Documents, themselves then, contain absences in that they only present what they present: their meaning may be understood only by thinking and working beyond the immediate archive space, where the researcher has to travel to other spaces (archives, libraries, documents, accounts) to build up dimensions of context for reading the archive's absences. This all calls for a methodological re-framing of working *with* as opposed to just *in* the archive.

It is this working *with* that may allow an *animation of the archive*, whereby attention to those animations can also bring the researcher into touch with knowledges that might immediately be more absent. For example, Hammond (2020) notes that absence and partiality are a generative political force that pays attention to both authoritative and silenced voices. Rather than working in the archive and simply accepting absence in the lack of voices that are silenced in dominant accounts of the archive, a process of working *with* urges an attention to practising a political geography of the past that shifts beyond the immediate archive space to a world of context. This allows the researcher to probe *why* there may be silences in the account. Because power relations are often circulated across documents in the making of certain knowledges (Mills 2013b), this means the researcher must likewise follow documents rather than dealing with files or documents as discrete, sealed, units of understanding.

Moreover, there may also be knowledges deep within the archive, hidden from immediate view, that to grasp them we must, methodologically, think with and *beyond* the purely textual to engage with material, embodied experiences of "being-in-the-world" that are *present* in material littered with absence (Griffin and Evans 2008, p. 11). Whilst archive material may have knowledges that are immediately evident in their contents, there is also a subtext that researchers may grasp, which reveals meaning, and otherwise hidden dimensions of power. Indeed, embodied actions, affects and emotions, for example, all form part of networks of action (Lorimer 2005) but can be hard to verbally denote and obscured by the very textual nature of archives in themselves. Yet thinking about non-representational geographies, and deploying theories of practice and liveliness in working methodologically *with* the archive, allows us to approach the representations in archives rather more "as an interface between author's intentions and viewers' or readers' experiences, which plays a creative role in producing, rather than simply reflecting, society" (Slatter 2023, p. 29). For example, Jones (2020, p. 67) shows through exploring maritime soundscapes of protest—an active, embodied, lively activity—by placing what *could* be said (in the record) within the context of what *couldn't*

be said "assumptions and understandings which contextualized the creation and reception of these sounds" could be unearthed, "recapturing meaning" (Jones 2020, p. 66). Working with these forms of partiality—with absence—allows us to reflect on how intimate and embodied politics play out through silences and to explore what they can tell us about historical experiences of the past through more relational readings of power. As such, we should approach what we encounter in the archive as "always open to interpretation…thinking about that which is not directly preserved in the archives" (Awcock 2021b, p. 1).

Similarly, we can actively deepen our engagement with how historical actors engaged everyday practices through enlivening absence by stitching together how language and words (Medby, 2019) are able to construct spatial metaphors that we can choose to follow and trace (McGeachan 2016). Sarah Whatmore and Jamie Lorimer (2009) for example have explored the colonial hunting diaries of Samuel Baker across nineteenth-century Sri Lanka to explore the 'seeing men' of colonial visions. They show through the accounts in Baker's diaries, which denote metaphors of conquest over the 'beasts', how colonial conquests were undertaken in very embodied and materially significant ways. They work with the archive to pay attention not just to the metaphor but the 'lively' elements of practice conveyed in the record. They conclude that "standard methods of historical geography – which search discursive meaning in assorted texts – are not wholly sufficient and run the risk of 'deadening' the practices being examined" (Lorimer and Whatmore 2009, p. 675). Their work therefore shows how an affectively-charged nature of coloniality emerged through the embodied politics between humans and animals and the role this played in the production of the empire.

Tuimmur Hammond (2023) has furthermore engaged with the notebooks of the historian Ahmet Süheyl Ünver to think about questions of faith and religion. Hammond explores how Ünver's embodied act of writing and creating in itself is a way to think about how embodied subjectivities relate to the meaning of the text. Hammond specifically asks of the archive "[w]hat are we to make of all these scattered objects, filed away over the course of 50 years? What kind of (religious) place do these objects make?" (2023, p. 365). Rather looking for the essence of religion in the texts, Hammond considers Ünver's material and embodied relationship to place during the twentieth century in Istanbul in order to locate a sense of self that is beyond typical discursive traditions. This urging to work *with* archives and pay attention not just to what is present, but the absences, urges us to excavate more deeply—to think with and about context, lived realities, embodied practices that also constitute the material. This means methodologically going in search of these absences—of breaking away from accepted modes of archival research, to techniques that are alert to the more animated dimensions of past worlds. Indeed, pasts were once present—the worlds of archives describe are worlds which were lively—and it makes sense them to see them, and research them as such.

Beyond more-than-textual, practical engagements with archive context/content, and reading *with* embodied, lively elements of material, the very materiality of archives also *matters* in animating archival absences. Slatter (2019), for example,

argues that there needs to be a greater role for the place of material sources in historical geography work, and a greater *depth* with geographer's engagements with the *materiality* of the past. We can see this firmly in the work that argues that planetary pasts (and their assessment for making sense of current climate change) can be read in the very matter of the earth 'ice cores, boreholes, lake and ocean sediments, pollens, tree rings, corals, stalactites and stalagmites, and other natural features that index climatic events' (Mattern 2017, np, see also Lehman on the ocean as an archive, 2016). Questions of materiality and *immateriality*—such as the earthly matter or language—may show how power is embedded 'in between the lines' of the archival text. As noted previously, refocusing on absence and taking note of silences and historically exclusions is methodically important for contesting the 'official' narratives that the archive presents (Ogborn 2003). All this said, we shouldn't think of undertaking archival work as an objective fact-finding exercise or as a way to simply confirm certain knowledge or practices. This can often exclude important geographies. In our own engagement with archives, recognising lived, material worlds helps us to trace the development and manifestations of social practices that offer insight towards how particular worlds come into being as well as their changing temporalities (Slatter 2019). By bringing the theoretical tools of critical geography into conversation with historical methods, we can actively re-think the ways we understand, speak about and can intervene in present-day political geographies.

In this section we have showed how archival absences may be attended to through a practising of archive methods alert to non-representational elements to read the materiality of the archive differently. We argue this becomes a way of unearthing the politics of practices and performances that often go overlooked in political geography research about the past. Across our own research, we became attuned towards unearthing and producing more deeply excavated political-historical geographies through not just spaces and actors, but also the habits, knowledges and intimacies (Jackman et al. 2020) of bodily and material interactions. Thinking about the way actors of the past engage with one another, it is challenging to make sense of how communication of the past can be represented in the present. Whilst we only have written accounts from, for example, meetings or diaries—for they do not offer full biographical insights that tell complete stories—we can methodologically make sense of communication in more plural ways. This is described in the accounts to follow.

Moreover, though using archives during and across the COVID-19 pandemic it also became clear that obtaining complete historical accounts was impossible with the closure of archives over several months in many countries. This created further absences. Working more deeply with what we had already obtained prior to archive closures also became a methodological strategy but one that also allowed further reflection on absences—of records and of absences within them. For many, the pandemic left a wandering question of access as something that required historical researcher to have a 'methodological re-think'. The absences created as a result of the pandemic therefore permitted us to consider deeper ways of approaching our

existing data, but they also pose generative potentials for more creative ways of thinking about the past. We turn to our accounts next.

Digging Deep in the Archive: Finding Life Amidst Death

The Wirral Archives is a repository that is part of the National Archive Collection in the UK and currently houses over 8 miles of records, and was originally based in Birkenhead Town Hall until 2008 before moving to its current location, the Cheshire Lines Building which had a larger volume of storage space. The archive is based in Wirral, the geographical peninsula of land adjacent to Liverpool in north-west England, 'the other side of' the Mersey River. Its histories are linked to maritime industry and its urban growth has been tied to its close neighbour, with Mersey River acting as an exchange space between the peninsula (whose east coast has been a significant site of shipping building) and the metropolis of Liverpool, a city tied globally to the rest of the world through its history in the trade of enslaved peoples in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and its later connections to the 'New World' through major shipping routes that connected Liverpool with New York, and other East Coast American cities (i.e. through the Cunard shipping line). The Wirral Archives employs three full-time members of staff, with their duties spanning records management (including document verification and authenticity assessments) and maintaining and updating online databases and IT systems, along with the management of the actual archive. The busyness of the role means core archiving jobs such as cataloguing, indexing and sorting, or replacing damaged folders and boxes are put on hold until time can be made for such tasks. It also means external activities are impacted, such as promotional events, talks and educational endeavours (such as links to schools and universities) that help to promote the archive and its records and further justify their value and existence. The COVID-19 pandemic also had ramifications on these core jobs with many activities on hold until the archive could properly catch up with a backlog of enquiries and verifications, with the Wirral Archives also delayed in its reopening following guidance changes to the UK government's lockdown policy.

The Wirral Archives holds municipal records related to many aspects of Wirral life, from death and burial (the focus of Author one, Cameron's work) to the workhouses of the nineteenth century (the focus of Author two, Ella's work).[1] Turning to Cameron's research focus, this work considered the voluminous geopolitics and territories of death in the Wirral region (see Bryon 2024a). His case study focused on the development and contested politics of burial in the nineteenth century (a time of huge population increase) using records from the archive, which included maps, plans, meeting minutes, health records and so on. His aim was to add *depth* to understandings of burial, against the grain of flat plans and spatial allocations

[1] Author 3 acted as supervisor, with a wider supervisory team, including for Cameron Bryon, Andy Davies (University of Liverpool), and for Ella Bytheway-Jackson, Bethan Evans and Sally Sheard (University of Liverpool) and Jennifer Turner (Universität Trier).

for dealing with death in the region. This meant paying attention, ironically, to the embodied or lived experiences of mapping burial territories, which were attentive to volume. Volume was not front and centre in the records—the word itself was *absent*—but it was volume that was *enlivened* in the discussions of how the municipal government departments (such as the Wirral Burial Board) would manage death. Volume was an essential context in making sense of the politics of burial.

Work on volume has been alert to the embodied dimensions of immersion in the very three-dimensional qualities of space (Elden 2013). Such recognitions have highlighted the need to methodologically (besides conceptually) think with volume in order to go some way to knowing it. Volumetric territories produce insights into how bodies are immersed and sensed, for example (Hawkins 2020; Jackman and Squire 2021; Pérez and Zurita 2020; Squire 2017). Through archive engagement Cameron found himself asking how volume was sensed and worked with in lively ways. Paying attention to the spatial politics of negotiations, access, exclusions and everyday decision-making in relation to burial space opened up the *volumes* of the cemetery—something otherwise flat and two-dimensional *in* the archive records alone. Here we also suggest digging *deeper*: embracing notions of volume in reading archives for absences.

Indeed, orking *with* the archives and paying attention to the more immediately absent, but no less animated nature of space articulated in them, through records about public health concerning the dead body, Cameron started to unveil how the materiality of the dead body seemed to interact *across* and *through* volumes (with the groundwater, the soil, the air and atmosphere). He sought to challenge the deadened, dusty subjects of the archive, and death, as passive and static. Death was lively. Death was mobile. Documents revealed concerns, literally, of the seepage of death into the groundwater, *raising* public health concerns. Here the archive was read not as a stable representation, but in reading deeply, the lively nature of matter was revealed—and with it, the absences that were not otherwise noted in the official record (such as the fact that public health concerns led to a governance of territory at depth). As Cameron's thesis noted,

> In 1893, the Memorandum on the Sanitary Requirements for Cemeteries was published by the Local Government Board with laws 'extended to include the acquisition, construction and maintenance of a place of interment...to prevent it becoming a source of nuisance and danger to the living.'[2] and these regulations started to take seriously the more microbial geographies of spaces of death… it made clear that 'Foul liquids from graves may enter and pollute a stream, or wells in the vicinity of a graveyard may be injured by percolation from it, and in either case if the water be used for drinking, injury to health my occasion'.[3] These followed a series of recommendations from the Medical Department, including making sure that graves that were dug had no presence of groundwater for at least three feet to allow for

[2] Local Government Board, Memorandum on the Sanitary Requirements for Cemeteries (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1893).

[3] Local Government Board, Memorandum on the Sanitary Requirements for Cemeteries (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1893).

> suitable groundwater drainage, and gave recommendations on the nature of specific soils and stones to allow for proper drainage[4]… These processual public health knowledges show how permeable matter is both understood and traced. Given a need to understand and 'to diversify understandings of the 'things' that fill volume and the actors, agents, and atmospheres that coalesce to enable, and (re)produce territorial constructs' and grapple with 'the unruly potential of flesh,' (Squire 2020, 3) looking more closely through the lens of death shows a consideration both beyond the human, and beyond conventional conceptualisations of territory in order to reckon with the voluminous capacities of spaces of death. (Bryon 2024b, pp. 199–200)

As such, Cameron's work sought attentiveness to absent, non-representational animations of space, to the movement of matter and the meanings of volume. Within the archive, deeper questions of agency—especially when engaging with both human and non-human subjects—were revealed. Despite the partiality of written records, he found that writing upon the record, *digging deeper* by drawing out the mobile, liveliness of the moments conveyed in the record, it became possible to unearth the more embodied-affective practices that constituted history, and actually configure the way political-historical geographies were playing out. This was a non-representational practice in action. As Griffin and Evans argue,

> [m]any geographers adopting this [non-representational] approach have primarily focused their attention on the present or recent past. Indeed, if one is seeking to break new ground by escaping the tyranny of representation and by immersing oneself within lived, visceral practices, then a dusty archive brimming with words and symbols hardly seems the best place to begin. Furthermore, whilst sophisticated accounts of non-representational theory and performativity highlight the ways in which language and practice interact and have drawn attention to the performative nature of representations (i.e. their ability to intervene with rather than mimic reality), many proponents of non-representational theory still seem to possess a latent desire to journey to the "somewheres words can't take you" and to privilege ethnography over text, witnessing over reporting. This in turn has meant that many non-representational geographers have implicitly distanced themselves from any ability to engage with past practices through archival sources. (Griffin and Evans 2008, p. 6)

Cameron's research demonstrated the benefits of a lively approach to the archive to raise absences from the depths of records, to read for the animated, mobile, phenomena at play that shaped the governance of death (at depth). Such readings were all the more important during the pandemic when he had to work only with the records he held already, collected prior to the archive's closure. Unable to continue to access more records, he became intent on reading more deeply. One might even argue that the absence of further access to records enlivened new practices that encouraged him to look more closely at what he had, pulling forth, or unearthing, absences in these records that might have otherwise remained obscured. Pandemic or not, archives such as the Wirral are facing budgetary constraints which increasingly limit their operations and with that, the access possibilities of researchers.

[4] Edwin Chadwicke, "A supplementary report on the results of a special enquiry into the practice of interment in towns" (London: Methuen, 1843).

A take on engaging the archive at depth: seeking out the non-representational, animated elements hidden in textual records is an important methodological turn in understanding how modes of practice are part of, in this case the domestic geopolitics that would become embedded within cemetery space.

Finding Fillers: Alternative Sources for Absences

Working also with the Wirral Archives collection, Ella's work centres on the historical-political geographies of care and the carceral geographies of Wirral workhouses. Together with Cameron, her work also approaches archive absence. Many record collections held in archives are truly extensive and yet there are a very limited number records that are digitised and hence remotely accessible. Whilst the Wirral archives had been open in early 2020, there was only a small window of time available for collecting data before the pandemic hit. As such, both Cameron and Ella spent more time looking for greater historical context, including attempting to find other historical sources such as digitised newspapers. Whilst many local newspapers have also not yet been digitised from the Wirral repositories, there are some that are, and it is often the case that minutes of meetings, for example, reported in the press, and letters were often written up and published in some of the reported columns. These can be found, for example, by digital sources such as FindMyPast. This source proved invaluable for piecing together a somewhat broad timeline of certain events and moments. These accounts and their fragments have the potential to be 'fillers' and to be brought to life. In the face of practicality it has been argued we can "make do with materials at hand, and use this material to craft stories about people and places that might otherwise go untold" (DeSilvey 2007, pp. 421–422). Here, because of the partiality of recorded accounts, or indeed the complete absence of events, creative thinking with forms of materiality offers a methodological means of restoration, but also a way of honing in on significant moments that can often be overlooked in simple narrative terms in the archive.

Indeed, rather than simply making do, through 'digging deeper' we could search for alternatives in the face of absences. Using adjacent sources such as newspapers helped us to think more generatively about absence particularly in relation to forms of power between people and objects that can perhaps be more carefully understood through creative undertakings that shine a light on the role and place of material objects in the past that otherwise go overlooked. Partiality, therefore, provides scope for more creative and imaginative enlivenings (Mills 2013b). As Lorimer argues, "[t]reating individuals as fluid and multiple, while accepting that they are ultimately unknowable, opens out space for the experimental, interpretative reconstructions that follow" (2003, p. 204). This means thinking about the different social and material ways they interact with past spaces drawing out 'thicker textures' (ibid., p. 204) of political pasts. The significance of these events being told in the format of newspaper stories and the rich content non-fiction writing can make provides stories of ordinary and simultaneously extraordinary

individuals based on interactions with the places, people or materials that are linked to their lives.

For example, one of four short stories in Ella's thesis was built upon a letter published in the Liverpool Daily Post on 23 May 1866, written on behalf of a group of 244 Germans who took several weeks temporary refuge in the newly constructed, empty workhouse hospital building for use by the Birkenhead Poor Law Union:

Higher Tranmere, 21st May 1866

"Gentlemen,- We the undersigned foreign emigrants, beg to express our warmest thanks to the Guardians of the Birkenhead Union, the clergy, medical gentlemen, and all who, during our stay at Birkenhead, at all times so largely contributed to the comfort and happiness of the emigrants put under their care. We sincerely acknowledge the sacrifices made on their part to add to our happiness and to make the time of our staying there as pleasant to us as possible. Praying that God the Almighty may a thousand fold repay them for their kindness, we assure them we shall always remember the kind and fatherly reception and care received from the master and all the other officials and servants connected with the establishment. It will at all times be a thing of pleasure to us to recal to our minds the happy days when we were domiciled at Birkenhead; and the more so when we take into consideration the great calamity that happened to the passengers of the ill-faited ship Helvetia. Finally thanking them once more in the name of all, we beg to conclude by wishing them every prosperity and happiness – We have the honour to be your most obedient and humble servants".

Their unexpected stay on Birkenhead's shore was necessitated by an outbreak of cholera on board the steam ship, *SS Helvetia*, that was heading for New York. As previously mentioned, Liverpool was at this time a hub for migration to the United States—this ship embarked on its usual voyage from Liverpool and was turned around upon its final dock in Ireland due to the medical condition of some passengers on board. The cholera outbreak sent the shipping company and local authorities in the Merseyside region into deadlock as they struggled to decide on a suitable place to quarantine the hundreds of people who they considered a risk to the significant local population in Liverpool. After much debate, the smaller town across the water of Birkenhead was forced to receive the ship and provide weeks of respite care for its passengers.

In the administrative records of the Union (which at the time of research were irretrievable due to the closure of the archives), there is little evidence of the nature of this unexpected arrival which would have constituted a significant change in the population of the workhouse and a real undertaking for the staff and system to care for hundreds more people. There is even less evidence which points to the profound gratitude that those hundreds of emigrants expressed towards the institution that welcomed them. In this case, the newspapers act as one of the only sources of the story which speaks to the character of this experience, particularly from any perspective beyond that of the authorities. Paying attention to the potential variety of sources, as well as the sources' purposes—journalistic, academic, administrative, reflective, persuasive—and being attuned to the perspectives and

stories that they can enable an understanding of, really underscores the value of seeking alternative sources beyond 'official' record.

Beyond using alternative sources, work by feminist, post and de-colonial scholars also reflects the possibilities of further creative reflections in archive work to unlock absences. This includes narrative and storying approaches. As Sarah de Leeuw argues (2014, p. 67) "[n]arrative, or story, allows for humans to truly understand each other" as a multi-directional tool of reflecting with the past in the present. Through storytelling as a method and an output, political histories can be carefully reconstructed into a form of creative non-fiction that helps animate pasts and bring absence to life. Political geographers are now thinking with and using fiction and storying as a method due to the "political possibilities afforded by storytelling as a mode of expressing non-representational, (post)phenomenological geographies" (Cameron 2012, p. 573). Storytelling forms our existence, as an act of telling, or re-telling to make visible, but also acknowledge stories have equally been used to invisible people, places and histories. This is a further way of animating absences (and one Ella has used in previous Masters work, see Bytheway-Jackson 2020).

Indeed, because of the nature of partiality and how stories become crafted, great care is taken when presenting a variety of characters, events and perspectives that are pulled out of *existing* material sources. Of course, this means that again, what is often produced is also inherently full of absences and partialities, but these become embraced and acknowledged. So engaging more creative outputs in the form of storytelling and short stories can furnish a variety of perspectives that push political geography towards an 'empirical biography' that looks at broadening the scope of existing methods. Further, oral stories (Lorimer and Parr 2014) from encounters with people (for example, visits in and around the archive and peripheral conversations on journeys to and from the archive) can also reveal a number of sources that are often overlooked in historical-political geography work: local people themselves. Simply talking about your research can also be generative in this sense, as questions, ideas, memories and stories may also arise and in turn form part of your research story.

Conclusion

The way we handle absence, by thinking *with* absence in methodological ways—the very things we do in engaging archives—is necessary to enliven and mobilise political geographies of the past and to pay attention to what may be more immediately 'missing' in the record. Indeed, archives are spaces of presence and absence—of material available and of gaps and omissions. Archives are, by their nature, always incomplete, a result of the politics of their configuration, collation and cataloguing. Archives are hence political. They are also enrolled methodologically in political geography, even if they are more often seen to 'belong' to historical geography (not that either are sealed categories). Whether they are

national or local archives, state held collections or owned by private organisations, or collations of material which are deeply personal, archives are always limited, always unfinished. What is collected, in what way, by whom, on what scale, where, for what reasons—what is kept and what is discarded—all demonstrates that archives are not mirrors of the past but specific, biased, constructions of such. Archive resources, archive research, are rarely apolitical. It is always partial. There are always absences. Those partialities and absences are themselves political.

In this chapter, we have set out to attend to absence and to think about how absence may be countered through non-representational approaches of animating archives: digging deep(er) and finding fillers to draw out what is often obscured in the records. We have demonstrated these techniques as even more necessary in exceptional times (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) when archives were routinely closed, and researchers hence had to work more closely with 'what they had' in the absence of more material. These issues are not limited to an exceptional moment of global precarity, however. Archives are subject to budgetary whims and other (economic and political) forces that might limit access. Thinking of how we might work with archives differently or more fully—their absences and in the face of absence—is hence crucial to researchers.

We have set out the literature that considers ways of *enlivening* political geographies of the past through interrogating the more-than-textual ways of approaching the archive's partiality. Here, we offered an account of doing a non-representational historical-political geography (Lorimer and Whatmore 2009; Slatter 2023) linking also to our own work in the Wirral Archives UK (Woodyear and Carter 2020; Jackman et al. 2020; Sharp 2021). Through these accounts we demonstrated the generative ways historical sources can produce political knowledge by offering perspectives that branch out from the more typical data sources to more informal and unexpected knowledge encounters that help us attend differently to absence (looking for animated, mobile or lively worlds, or reading around the archive). We have proposed the methodological approach of 'digging deeper' and 'finding fillers' to work with archive—in and beyond—challenging times. Indeed, the difficulties posed by the pandemic have inspired us to think more generatively towards how geographers can deal with absence, particularly in reference to the absence of the archive records themselves. We have showed that being more-than-textual—noticing dynamic and lively worlds, and storying histories—can offer strong insights towards political questions of power, agency, justice, life and death.

As a whole, we believe that both deeper and creative methodological thinking can be of use to political geographers using archives and archival materials, to enrich the types of questions that the archive begs and to be more reflective towards thinking *with* absence and partiality—a core political concern of historical work. We have offered a way of navigating historical work that animates absent archives and provides a toolkit for political geographers working with the past. Drawing from our experiences—within and beyond exceptional times—we encourage others to engage these in practices, in researching in more lively, mobile and creative ways, what are often seen to be the static (and dusty) worlds of archives.

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