

COLD WARS AND SUMMER-NIGHT DANCES:

An Archaeology of the Iron Curtain: Material and Metaphor, by Anna McWilliams and *Minnen från vår samtid: Arkeologi, materialitet och samtidshistoria (Memories of our Time: Archaeology, Materiality and Contemporary History)* by Maria Persson

ÞÓRA PÉTURSDÓTTIR

UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø

A review of:

An Archaeology of the Iron Curtain: Material and Metaphor. By Anna McWilliams, Södertörns Högskola, 2013. Paperback, 252 pp. ISBN 978-9-186-06978-0.

Minnen från vår samtid: Arkeologi, materialitet och samtidshistoria (English: *Memories of our Time: Archaeology, Materiality and Contemporary History*). By Maria Persson, Gothenburg University, 2014. Hardback, 329 pp. ISBN 978-9-185-24555-0.

Archaeology of the contemporary past is not merely a thriving field of research but also an increasingly established field, as reflected in this journal as well as in a growing number of dissertations completed within its scope. The present theses of McWilliams and Persson are good examples of this; brilliant archaeological case studies, which among other more specific objectives also aim, as the authors state, to generally contribute to an ongoing theoretical discourse and methodological development – and, thus, further establishment – of the archaeology of the contemporary past. Both works, furthermore, succeed in this endeavor, providing good examples of archaeology conducted on remains related to recent historical events and processes.

Apart from this, and from the very fact that both were concluded at Swedish universities within the span of one year, these two works are rather unlike. There are surely several links and connections to be drawn, which I will come back to, but primarily I find it necessary at the outset to underline their independence and distinct character. Surely archaeological trends and development may at times be reflected in geographical patterns but presupposing such associations is, I believe, rather outmoded. Hence, though doing so in this review treating these works as kindred is not necessarily straightforward and depicting them as representative of a particular “*Swedish contemporary archaeology*” is probably misleading. Therefore, and also avoiding direct comparison of the two, I will in the following view them, side by side, and in light of the broader development of contemporary archaeology, which also will bring forth some mutual connecting themes. First, however, let me begin with a short recapping of each of the theses.

Beginning with McWilliams, her work explores the very complex phenomenon of the Iron Curtain that divided East and West in Cold War Europe. Limiting her study to the period 1945-1989, and geographically to the stretch of borders between the Baltic and Adriatic, the author also warns that the Iron Curtain may be seen as much more complex and widespread phenomenon. Furthermore, as McWilliams explains the complexity of the Iron Curtain is not least captured in the tension between, on the one hand, the Curtain as a tangible object and chain of physical borders in the landscape and, on the other hand, the Iron Curtain as metaphor for an ideological division between the opposing blocs of East and West. Discourses about Cold War issues rarely elude notions of the Iron Curtain, grasped for example in insinuations regarding what went on *behind* it or after its *fall*. And yet, McWilliams proclaims, people in general have limited knowledge of the actual borderlands or the physical structures that materially upheld the distinction between us and them. Moreover, she states, the remains of these have similarly received little attention in the Cold war's aftermath. However, while the actual structures and borderlands become gradually more overgrown, assimilated and gentrified the *idea* of the Iron Curtain lives on as a metaphor, and so powerful as such that it may be claimed to blot not only historical understanding of the period in general but also of the Curtain's physical existence. "[Y]ou know that the Iron Curtain never actually existed? It was a metaphor", McWilliams (2013, 16) was assured by a friend at the outset of her study. And it is this very "inconsistency, the paradox of the real and imagined" (ibid.), the diverging or "fusion of the physical and abstract" (ibid., 31), that makes the Iron Curtain so interesting, she declares. "Do they tell the same story? If not, does one story take precedence when we write our Cold War history? How do the stories that emerge from the metaphor and the materials fit within the local and world history" (ibid.).

Approaching this paradox the aim of the study is twofold. Firstly, "to explore what knowledge about the Iron Curtain can be reached through the material traces it has left behind as well as the effects these remains have on people around them" (McWilliams 2013, 16). This also involves questions regarding heritage and the various heritage processes affecting the Iron Curtain's construction as such, or, in other cases, its position outside heritage notions. A second and more general aim is "to contribute to the continuous discussion and methodological development of the archaeology of the contemporary past" (ibid.). As McWilliams points out direct methodological discussion in relation to contemporary archaeology has so far been rather limited, and her research is, thus, to be seen as "a way to test and further the understanding of the study of sites from a contemporary past" (ibid., 18).

The study rests on three case studies, two of which are carried out in the borderland areas between Italy and Slovenia (in and in the vicinity of the towns of Gorizia and Nova Gorica), and between the Czech Republic and Austria (focused on the Podyji National Park) respectively. A third case study concerns the materiality of the Inner German borderline, and in particular the Berlin Wall. The three cases appear well chosen and serve to provide a broad understanding of the Iron Curtain by also underlining the divergence and complexity of the phenomenon, both literally and abstractly. The description of the cases takes up

a lot of room though, and it could be argued that two cases instead of three would have been material enough, allowing for more detailed discussion of each and, more importantly, a more nuanced connection between the cases.

The study of the Berlin Wall is not least concerned with the Iron Curtain as “physical metaphor”, as constructed through political propaganda and popular media. Here McWilliams discusses how The Wall became, and has remained, a denominator for “what the Iron Curtain should look like” (McWilliams 2013, 45) and thus how its materiality arguably became “a manifestation of the Cold War division rather than a result of it” (ibid., 50). Focusing on the material remains in the respective borderlands, their history and afterlife, the other two case studies provide a contrast to this iconic image of The Wall. Conducted through an interweaving of archaeological survey, interviews and historical data, both cases bring forth a tension between different notions of the past, different attitudes towards the current remains, and interesting frictions between local conditions and conventional notions of a global Cold War History. Rather than allowing any one side or aspect precedence McWilliams rather embraces the conflicting narratives produced from the different sources and research areas. In a fascinating way, her study, thus, serves to make the Iron Curtain more complex rather than less, embracing the coincident realities of partition and cross border contact, harsh regulation and alternative ways of getting around. The case studies, moreover, together with McWilliams’ personal and affective way of writing, both serve to bring forth the mundane aspects of the material remains studied and the everydayness of life on and near the border.

Persson’s thesis is based on two case studies. One concerns the current recreational center and previous rehabilitation camp at Skatås in Gothenburg, Sweden, which in 1945-1946 came to house survivors from Nazi concentration camps who arrived in Sweden with the White Buses rescue action (Persson 2014, 119-132). The other case deals with an abandoned amusement park and dance pavilion, Ramneskärsparken, near Uddevalla on the west coast of Sweden, which was in use from 1939 to 1955 (ibid., 105-118). In most aspects thus, the two cases and sites have very little in common; one represents a rather bleak part of our recent past while the other commemorates romance and summer night dancing. One, Skatås, is still in use (though its role has changed), while the other is abandoned and overgrown. It is not the history and archaeology of the two sites that is central in Persson’s study, however, but the archaeological process itself. The aim of her thesis is “to problematise contemporary archaeology as a field of research”, with particular emphasis on two aspects, which she identifies as central to a contemporary archaeology though underdeveloped and often overlooked. These are the field’s *methodological development* and its *public potential* (ibid., 18, 287).

In line with this the archaeological investigations carried out at the two research sites are analyzed from the perspective of four different components (Persson 2014, 52-54). Firstly, from the perspective of archaeological methods, asking how traditional archaeological methods (excavations, survey, documentation)

may be applied or reworked in contemporary archaeological contexts. Secondly, from the perspective of community archaeology, Persson explores the processes and success of the public outreach and participation in the two case investigations. Thirdly, Persson discusses the two cases from the perspective of contemporary archaeology as interdisciplinary science, focusing on the use of non-archaeological sources and methods. Fourthly, she discusses the archaeological material itself, how this interacted with other source material and how the finds also played a leading role in the public outreach effort at the two sites, triggering dialogue and memory work.

Persson presents the concept of *materiality* as the uniting factor or link between the four components, encompassing the relational and performative field where people and things meet and interact (Persson 2014, 29-41). But as evident there is yet considerable overlap between the components, which at times results in some unnecessary repetitions. This also echoes into the thesis' two main themes where the one regarding community archaeology and contemporary archaeology's public potential, appears dominating as much of the discussion regarding the other theme, methodology, is steered towards this in terms of applicability and relevance. This should not be read as pure critique, however. Rather, I believe it is the discussion of contemporary archaeology's public potential and how this was achieved through the two case studies that is truly original and the thesis' most important contribution. It is, moreover, not least in relation to this that the underlying focus on materiality becomes most clear and interesting. The critique is rather that this could have been made more explicit, also in relation to the discussion of methods.

In discussing the theme of public potential Persson (2014, 165-199) describes the means employed to adjust the investigations at both Ramneskärsparken and Skatås to a broader spectrum of participants. This both involved outreach initiatives on site through various media, but also direct participation and input from public interest groups in (and thus collaboration on aspects of) project planning, fieldwork and interpretation. Evaluating both the pros and cons of the projects the discussion is partly methodological, aiming to not only highlight the importance of democratizing archaeology but also how to do this. All or most of the non-archaeological participants had some form of connection to the site under investigation, through past or current use. Their involvement in excavation and other activities on site thus infused memory and memory processes, which, through interview and dialogue with the professional staff, became valuable and informative input for understanding the two sites. In this relation Persson, again, underlines the significance of materiality – the participant's interaction with the site, with things found and the physicality of the archaeological work itself – and how this steered memory, dialogue and engagement. In this relation she especially stresses the significance of excavation, as a means of engaging people and starting dialogue (ibid., 218-232). What is wanting, however, is possibly a more critical discussion of the expert/non-expert relationship and the ethics involved in this collaboration, as well as of the definition/selection of interest groups. Are these exclusively composed of individuals that have a 'positive' and 'constructive' relation to the

site in question, or would it be of value to attempt to actively involve also those that are highly skeptical/critical of the project?

The methodological development of contemporary archaeology is central for both McWilliams and Persson. Both articulate this as underdeveloped and both wish to – and, indeed, do – contribute to its progress through their works. Their take on the issue differs but there are, nevertheless, some mutual perspectives and arguments. Both authors stress how access to a wide(r) variety of sources, as written sources, photographs, film and first hand memories, sets contemporary archaeology apart from the archaeology of earlier periods. Moreover, both authors show how creative and critical use of these, and in particular of individual memories through interviews, brings valuable nuances to archaeological and historical data.

I believe the authors are very right when arguing that the methodological aspect of contemporary archaeology is so far interestingly undebated. Indeed, the development of contemporary archaeology has been claimed to have shifted the definition of Archaeology from time (the past) to *what we do*. And so, asking what it is that we do, and how, should be a legitimate and important question. It is also regarding these queries that I find the works of McWilliams and Persson most stimulating. Not because they give me the answers but because they are specific about *what they do, how, and why*, and thus provide the elements for further critical thinking and dialogue. A good example is McWilliams' account of her use of *walkover survey* and *observation* (McWilliams 2013, 17ff) in the borderlands, as well as her discussion of reflexivity/transparency and the value ingrained in allowing affect to infiltrate our academic texts (ibid., 20ff). So is also Persson's description of on site interviews referred to above. Both authors, moreover, use an array of different source material in their work, and manage to intertwine this into a convincing, though not seamless, whole. This especially characterizes the work of McWilliams who, more than Persson, deals with the fact that the different sources often tell very different stories. This urges a consideration of how we narrate archaeology and by which means. How we, for example, make room for the incoherency and fragmentation reflected in our data. Because, importantly, "by really appreciating a source for what it is, not only for how it fits with other sources, new insights can be made" (McWilliams 2013, 187-188).

Inclusive as they are of all these different sources an interesting precaution is, however, also very visible in the work of both McWilliams and Persson. An example of this is when Persson states that while these "*different sources* are used where they are best needed, ... the *archaeological method* and the *archaeological sources* are always the main thread running throughout the work" (Persson 2014, 295, emphasis added). And, as likewise stated by McWilliams, while "*other sources*, such as memories and stories, both oral and written, have been weaved together with the material ... My starting point, as well as my point of return has, however, been *archaeological*. It is in *the materials* that have been left behind that I have started my investigations" (McWilliams 2013, 19,

emphasis added). I should say that I recognize myself (and many others) in these quotes, but I also find them increasingly troubling.

Rodney Harrison (2011) has argued, in an article referenced by both authors, that as a result of archaeology's troubled relation with modernity and the conventional tropes of "archaeology-as-excavation" and discovery, contemporary archaeology has, despite its coming of age, been characterized by a "culture of self-justification". One way to overcome this insecurity, Harrison proclaims, is to abandon these conventional tropes for an understanding of "archaeology-as-surface-survey and a process of assembling/reassembling, and indeed to shift away from the idea of an 'archaeology of the contemporary past' to speak instead of an archaeology 'in and of the present'" (Harrison 2011, 141). Important here, is to understand *the present* not as a temporally purified stratigraphic layer but as composed and multitemporal. However, it appears to me that another hurdle in overcoming contemporary archaeology's insecurity is to also explore in what way its development has urged a rethinking of *the archaeological record*. Indeed, what is the source material of an archaeology in and of the present? – Or, what is not?

It is clear that McWilliams and Persson rely on a rather conventional understanding of the archaeological record; there are "archaeological sources" (generally characterized as *material*) and there are "other sources" (which includes everything from written documents, maps, photographs, films and pop culture, to individual memories and experiences). As underlined by McWilliams categorizing sources in this way is, however, not easy. "Is writing on a wall text or material? How do we classify a memory awakened by an object or a photo accompanied by and oral account?" (McWilliams 2013, 188). What I would ask, however, is whether we should (or can) make these distinctions at all? Importantly, this is not only a question of the *in-betweenness* (Andr n 1998) of an archaeology trapped between *things* and *texts* – which has been a predominantly epistemological debate – but rather a question of the ontological definition of the archaeological record (which does not only have consequences for contemporary archaeology but for the field in general). As an immediate example, how are we deal with plastiglomerate? Is it geological, archaeological or something else? Is landscape geographical, geological, political or archaeological? And why is a photograph not an archaeological source, while pollen apparently is?

As said, both McWilliams and Persson are explicit about their methods, and a shared example is their description of how interviews and individual memories were employed in their work. Here, McWilliams emphasizes how "bimbling", or "interviews conducted in and through a place" (Harrison and Schofield 2010, 76) was used "to generate a collage of collaborative knowledge" (ibid.) through the entanglement of archaeologist, interviewee and place (McWilliams 2013, 22ff). She states that these visits revealed "the importance of the material as a mnemonic" (ibid., 23). Similar arguments are found in Persson's accounts of the interviews conducted in relation to her investigations. These were preferably (and more or less exclusively) conducted on site, and even during collaborative excavation – while revealing and handling things (Persson 2014, 217-19). Thus,

also here dialogues were born through the interaction between archaeologist, informant, place, and the physical aspect of archaeological work. Hence, my question is why we should claim that the information and knowledge gained through these is something other than archaeological? Why are they not *archaeological interviews*, where interviewees, moreover, are important as *archaeological witnesses* (rather than e.g. historical)? And, is it possible that the same holds also for other source material employed, as photographs (both old and new) and archival material? In other words, is it important to identify graffiti as either text or material? Or, is it of archaeological interest because it is both – because similar to for example the “Iron Curtain” its materiality exceeds such definition?

To close, the works of McWilliams and Persson are a valuable contribution to methodological and theoretical discourses in contemporary archaeology as well as archaeology in general. They are well written, well-structured and illustrated (this is not a good descriptive concept) with some beautiful photowork – but most importantly they raise questions and are stimulating and inviting for further debate.

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