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Nick Papadimitriou. 2012. *Scarp: In Search of London's Outer Limits*. London: Sceptre. 271pp. Hardback.

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Scarp sits as a physical presence in Nick Papadimitriou's life. Living in the Northern suburbs of London, Papadimitriou has seen Scarp as the landscape in which his life is embedded and upon whose presence he has cast shadows and which has in turn cast shadows on him. Scarp is Papadimitriou's name for the North Middlesex/South Hertfordshire escarpment; this land feature that delineates the Northern margins of London is where he has spent most of his life, and with this book, where he entangles and disentangles his life and the geography of Scarp that surrounds him. Scarp gives Papadimitriou the title of his book and is his exploration into place and psyche, how man and landscape constitute each other. The book is part memoir, part investigation into a particular geography, and part archive of regional memory. *Scarp* weaves together layers of observation, interpretation, memory,

history, anecdote, archive, geology and geography. Papadimitriou shows us that landscape is not passive, not just to be regarded or traversed, but contains overlooked interpenetrations of which the history of our landscape and our own histories and memories are absorbed into. In *Scarp*, we see place as a source of knowledge, one which can be mined, in Papadimitriou's own words, as 'a storage vat of regional memory' (dir. Rogers 2009). Using close observation of landscape and drawing on archival material, in some cases scavenged from the very sites he visits and incorporates into his own personal archive, Papadimitriou tells us the story of this particular geography of London in its many forms: geological, cultural and historical.

The information that Papadimitriou gathers manifests itself in his written words and comes from a highly visual and physical

practice: the practice he describes as Deep Topography. The acts of walking and observing the geography of these particular parts of London concern themselves deeply with the particularities of place, employing anecdote, myth and its evocations intertwined with fact. Papadimitriou creates highly detailed and knowledgeable accounts of the sites he visits allied to recollections of his past and speculations on the past lives of others. These speculations are not mythologies that might obscure the historical truths, but are evocations of lost memories, the underrepresented or unacknowledged, to make coherent and reconnect that which history has scattered across the region he investigates. His stories veer from memories of his incarceration as a youth for arson (69–71), his voice assuming that of a friend from his past as he/they recount the drug-taking episodes and communal living in 1970s London suburbia (162–185). His descriptions of the rivers that flow downwards from the high land of Scarp evoke those valleys that determine the infrastructure of this geographical part of London.

This navigation through lives lived and places inhabited and observed reminds us of our belief in history as truth. In Papadimitriou's hands, history and truth are subordinate to memory and chance. The act of resurrecting that which is lost is vital, and we are reminded of his contemporary Iain Sinclair's words

when Sinclair describes such written practices: 'Memory-Prints of the lost are arranged, in the hope that such a ritual will restore the missing person, the loved one: daughter, brother, husband, father' (Sinclair 2007, 1–2). His motivation is to make sense of place not only through the previous incarnations of its archived regional history, the texts that it has already created, but also to link that which is known to that which has become obscured. We are asked to regard that which seems lost but is hidden in plain sight if we only look a while longer. It is an exploration of physical manifestations in site or place which are beyond, as Papadimitriou describes, our 'self-concern and an inward looking and anthropocentric culture' (1).

This close reading of site or place is his methodology of Deep Topography and it begins with the act of entering the landscape: the act of walking. Papadimitriou describes the beginnings of this practice often through memories of his youthful wanderings to escape a troubled family life and the sorrows he felt (210–27). In these early years we might hear the echoes of Walter Benjamin's Paris in Papadimitriou's melancholic steps. The streets that rise over Scarp might provide the intoxication that:

... comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever

weaker grow the temptations of bistros, of shops, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next streetcorner, of a distant square in the fog, of the back of a woman walking before him (Benjamin 1999, 880).

However, Papadimitriou is not the Parisian flâneur evoked by Benjamin, but a rather more directed individual. For the suburban walker Papadimitriou, place has determined and enabled his practice; the intoxication that comes through his practice of walking culminates on the true edgelands, the meeting point of city and country. This is the territory where *Scarp's* geographical and geological imperative asserts itself on the city and where its dominance subsides to the rising power of *Scarp*. This is the visual landscape of *Scarp*, a physical, material being that absorbs and emits its histories and memories to those who observe closely enough, whilst shaping the city that descends from its slopes (228–46).

What is compelling is that Papadimitriou's research methods truly enable an evocation of place. The possibilities of the visual re-engagement with site and place in Papadimitriou's practice does not overtly expose criticality of how our landscape is managed, how our sense of belonging to the landscape is controlled or mediated, but instead suggests how memory becomes contingent and contestable

through our active engagement with place. Papadimitriou does, however, recognise the political environment in which his work is placed when he explains that 'The deeper implication is that the world that confronts us through our immediate surroundings is alive and intrinsically linked in valuable ways not amenable to instrumental reason or economic reductionism' (11).

The Deep Topographic methodology also differentiates itself from psychogeography in its many guises. The Situationist movement of 1950s and 60s Paris, with its highly political motivations of the *dérive*, avowed the act of walking as a means of opening up the city to different mechanisms of understanding. Psychogeography emerged from this practice of walking and suggested one's ability to emotionally connect with the city in the face of architecture and systems of city management that alienate the individual from their city (Debord, Chetglov and Jorn ed. 1997). These Situationist beginnings influenced Papadimitriou's contemporaries such as Iain Sinclair and Will Self who echoed the leftist criticality of their Parisian forebears, and spurned a London-centric modern psychogeography that permeated many late 20th- and early 21st-century literary and artistic practices concerned with place. Papadimitriou's research practices do not overtly impress a political project, but rather share similarities

with filmmaker Patrick Keiller and his fictional researcher, Robinson. Deep Topography engages more deliberately with place and its materials than the Situationist *dérive* and its ensuing psychogeographic research practices and outputs. Deep Topography concerns itself with the material of landscape; it also shares some similarities in casting a gaze upon the overlooked ecologies of the city that have been expressed and evoked in the works of Richard Mabey where the social and architectural collide with the ecological in conflict at the edgelands.

Deep Topography allows for a research practice that embraces the full visuality of place, to encourage the closest readings of sites at their most visceral. It enables a re-engaging with place as a source of knowledge in all its obscured and obscuring modes, and allows for reflection on the information gathered to unfold a deeper understanding of the city, its suburbs and the peripheral landscapes surrounding us. In the book's Appendix, a transcript found by Papadimitriou called 'Perry Kurland's Journal', Kurland describes Deep Topography as 'passing through the land's eye' (254). It recognises that history is diffuse and eludes fixity much as we attempt to contain it. Memory and its evocations can issue forth from the visual and material world in many guises as we understand how memory is absorbed into the fabric of landscape and re-emitted. Finally,

it focuses on how our observations give way to knowledge after 'a return to home at day's end, after the exhaustion, a rising into something that is more than personal recollection: rather, it is the land's very structure and memory unfurling in the mind' (255).

Papadimitriou's book shows us his insight into the geography of Scarp and allows us through his eyes to see Scarp's structure and memory unfurl before us. I believe the use of such methods in their quiet criticality exposes a pressing political need for the public to engage with place. Place is increasingly becoming socially controlled; public space continues to be appropriated by private ownership, instrumentalised and employed solely for commercial imperatives that alienate and displace communities. Such trends determine under whose guardianship our civic environment is placed, exposing the undemocratic nature of how place is managed. Deep Topography avows place as a source of knowledge. This practice encourages a forensic interrogation of place and becomes a means of analysing how history, memory and culture aggregate over time and are absorbed into the fabric of our cities. Observing and interpreting the intersections of the physical, material and immaterial of cultural memory of place through Deep Topographic analysis could be an invaluable and essential tool for many of us. This practice and its methods are com-

elling, for those of us concerned with the built environment; for architects, town planners, urbanists and the public, these mechanisms of observation may assist us in demanding and creating the social re-development and democratisation of place.

References

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