

See with fresh eyes

By Linda Lappin

For writers, digging deep to find the soul of a place can inspire and unlock a 'bounty' of memory and material

“And immediately one feels: that hill has a soul, it has meaning.”
—D.H. Lawrence

One mark of a great novel, memoir or literary travel narrative is its rich rendering of a unique place and time. Bruce Chatwin's Patagonia,

Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria, Proust's Combray, D.H. Lawrence's Etruria, Alice Munro's small-town Canada, Walter Benjamin's Paris—all share a vivid evocation of place and a keen sense of how place shapes identity and character.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, people believed that every physical place—from an individual room to a continent—had its unique in-dwelling spirit, its spark of sacred, individual identity, called the *genius loci*. This soul, or spirit of place, imparted to that place its specific character and preserved its existence. The spirit of the place determined the development and vitality of all life forms in a given place, and influenced the character and destiny of human activities unfolding there.

For writers and artists, contact with the soul of place can unleash a flood of inspiration and unlock the gates to a bounty of memories, submerged impressions and other material.

Below the surface

“Deep map” is a term coined by Native-American writer William Least Heat-Moon in his extraordinary travel book *PrairyEarth* (1991), an in-depth exploration of a tiny corner of Chase County, Kan. He conducted the explora-

tion on foot following a highly structured itinerary charted on a grid of 12 quadrants drawn from U.S. Geological Survey maps of the area.

Heat-Moon's ramble across this territory is a vertical descent through recent and remote history, down into geological time. He weaves together exquisite passages of nature writing, cartography, poetry, local history and folklore, oral testimony by local residents, autobiography, sociology, archaeology. He penetrates deep into the realm of myths and legends belonging to the ancient Native-American residents of the area, with whom he conducts an interior dialogue.

Since his book came out, geographers have used “deep map” to refer to a sample section of the many layers of natural, cultural and personal history superimposed upon a given geographical spot. Therein lies the *genius loci*.

The following activity is designed to help you make a deep map of your own neighborhood or town. It also draws inspiration in part from an article by Elizabeth Vander Schaaf's titled “Finding the Soul of the City.” To complete a deep map, you may want to make several field trips, armed with notebook, pen and comfortable shoes, taking notes and maybe photographs as you go. But it may also be done simply by re-creating and evoking a place in memory.

Once you have worked through the activity all the way to the end, you will have a very different picture—much more detailed and sumptuous—than your present idea of the place you choose to investigate. For a range of writers, including travel writers and memoir writers, it will unlock a wealth of previously unrecalled details.

The body metaphor

In some African cultures, the layout of villages corresponds to an idealized form of the human body. Apply this metaphor to your own town or neighborhood. Looking at a map may help you visualize it that way. Aerial photography or images from Google Earth will also provide interesting perspectives. Where is the heart? The head? How are these marked or otherwise indicated? Locate the “center”—does it correspond to either heart or head?

Identify the boundaries, which may be said to correspond to the skin, separating this being from others or from the surrounding space. Examine the orifices and routes of access. Study the circulatory system, traffic routes, railways, subways. Note if there are any other features that might be said to correspond to human organs. Consider connective tissue: What connects the diverse zones?

Note the presence of water in any form: natural or artificial bodies of water, pipelines, water tanks, wells, treatment plants, fountains. Where are the other “watering holes” where people meet to eat and drink, bathe, swim?

Note the presence of fire in any form, including steam, power plants, electric lighting, concentrations of the colors red, yellow or orange.

Examine the verticality: What areas are “up” and which ones are “down”—both physically and socially? What distinguishes public space from private space in both types of areas? How do night and day affect the activities carried out in both areas? Who owns the streets by day and by night?

Where are the centers of money, power, religion and governance located

with respect to your other elements? Where are the major centers of production, communication and commerce?

Where is the cemetery? The recycling stations or landfills? The libraries, archives, universities, the courthouse? The prisons, hospitals, schools?

What areas are untouched by traffic or noise, which the noisiest?

Are there areas where specific groups of people tend to gather—men in groups or alone, children and teenagers, mothers with small children, students, the elderly, homeless, vagrants?

Where are the lonely places, the no-man's lands, the dangerous places? What distinguishes them from safe places?

Natural cycles and rituals

How does the cycle of seasons affect the appearance and life of the place?

Where is the highest density of plant life? Do populations of birds, animals or insects share your space?

Where can you see the fruits of the seasons displayed? Think metaphorically: "Fruits of the seasons" may also be shop merchandise or seasonal clothing.

Investigate and participate in the rituals of your neighborhood. When are the festivals or holidays celebrated? What exactly do they celebrate and

why? Consider major sports, school or political events, fairs, seasonal markets, carnivals and unofficial gatherings.

Chart the ritual itineraries used by pedestrians and motorists: children, teenagers, parade and protest-march routes, religious processions, funeral corteges, afternoon promenades, short-cuts, major traffic routes at rush hour.

What ritual objects are displayed throughout the neighborhood? Consider public art, decorations, civic inscriptions and monuments, commemorative shrines, religious monuments, billboards and signs as well as private shrines, private inscriptions or graffiti.

History

What place names (street names, etc.) are historical, religious, symbolic?

Who were the original founders of the neighborhood or town? Who lived there before them? What traces have they left? Are there historical monuments or even prehistoric ones attesting to early inhabitants, or have they been effaced? If so, when, why, and by whom?

What important historical events have occurred? Aside from battles, burials or political events connected to the civic or religious life of the place, also consider the private side of local legends

and gossip: scandals, tragedies, "visitations," odd occurrences or sightings.

Is there a "haunted house" or taboo place, place of shame, magic place? How is it designated? How do local residents think of it—children especially?

Do any places have special names given by locals or children? Do you note any secret or surprising connections between places, buildings, neighborhoods?

These questions help capture the essence of a familiar place, and offer interesting insights into new places.

The soul of a place—often unnoticed and uninterrogated—nourishes our roots and our connection to past times and places, and acts upon our imagination whenever we set off from home intent on new discoveries. Often our response to our surroundings remains unconscious and untapped, yet it is the informing power of place that shapes our wonder and our impression of our environment, wherever we may be.

Linda Lappin

Linda Lappin is the author of three novels, *The Etruscan*, *Katherine's Wish* and *Signatures in Stone* (forthcoming), and has taught essay writing in Italian universities for 28 years. Her newest book is *The Genius Loci: A Writer's Guide to Capturing the Soul of Place*.

WORKOUT

1. Choose a place near your home, school, workplace or university to study over time: 24 hours, a week, a month, a season, a year. It may be a busy square, a lonely road, an expanse of countryside, an urban neighborhood, a café, a tree, etc.

Notice how rhythms of change—hourly, diurnal, nocturnal, seasonal—affect the place. What details signal change? Keep a detailed journal. Notice how your capacity to see and sense the place will deepen over time.

2. Think back to your explorations of places through direct experience,

reading or only imagination. What environments are the most pleasing to you? The most thrilling? Think of environments that have charmed you. Can you identify elements of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque? Do any overlap?

Recall a moment you've experienced, either in a natural or artificial environment, when you've felt touched by a powerful emotion, a great silence or an overwhelming sound. First describe your surroundings using concrete imagery, then go on to describe your feelings. When you read a piece of travel

writing or landscape description you admire, notice if these elements are present.

3. Focus on one (or more) of the following encountered while exploring your place: an animal; plant; building; street or square; body of water; statue; park or garden; station; prison; church, temple, or other worship center; tomb; home; door; or gate.

Choose one of these as expressing the soul of a place and write a passage. You can try various means:

- Using the first person from the point of view of the item chosen. "I am ..."

- Using the second person, with the item chosen addressing you.
- A narrative passage in third person.
- Alternating first-person point of view with yourself as narrator and either of the first two approaches mentioned in this list.
- Structure a long poem or piece of writing, dedicating a line, stanza, paragraph or chapter to each of the locations I mentioned.
- Use this material as the frame for a fragment of childhood memoir, literary travel narrative or poem.

—L.L.