

Harrowed landscapes: white ruingazers in Namibia and Detroit and the cultivation of memory

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This article compares the ruins of Detroit and Namibia, focusing on the ways that previously dominant white groups use those ruins. In both cases ruined buildings appeal to these groups as particularly evocative objects. While the ruin seems always to signify transience, mortality and historicity, its more specific meanings are semantically underdetermined, varying by historical context and social group. Many white suburbanites use Detroit's industrial ruins to nourish their nostalgic longing for the city's golden era of Fordist prosperity. This does not seem to entail any confusion of past and present, however. The nostalgic object is unambiguously perceived as historical. By contrast, German-Namibians use colonial ruins to satisfy and perpetuate a sense of melancholia that simultaneously denies and acknowledges the end of German colonial power. Both forms of consciousness prefer ruins that are gradually being reassimilated into nature to the restored heritage sites of the tourist industry.

If all material objects are semiotically underdetermined, the ruin is particularly open to differing representations. In her analysis of the literature on postwar Germany's destroyed cities, Julia Hell (forthcoming) has shown that what seemed to one observer to be mere *rubble* was an evocative *ruin* for the next, a memento mori that conjured associations from the deep archive of ruin-imagery. The meanings imposed on an overgrown wall or a crumbled house vary radically from one community, individual or period to the next (Harbison 1991, 7).

In this article I examine the uses of two different ruins: in the post-colonial African country of Namibia; and in Detroit, a city that is no longer Fordist but not yet post-Fordist.¹ More specifically, I examine efforts by politically disempowered white groups to make these two ruins produce particular meanings. Both of these locations are *ruinscapes* in terms of the sheer number of decayed man-made structures and because these structures look entirely different depending on the viewer's social-spatial location (see Appadurai 1996 for this use of the 'scape' metaphor). In

both cases, members of the previously dominant white groups have created detailed itineraries of the ruins. But these ruinscapes are mobilised to nourish two differing psychopolitical postures in the two cases: melancholia and nostalgia.

RUBBLE STRATEGIES

The ruin's transient and processual character – the fact that natural decomposition seems to gain the upper hand inexorably over human accomplishment – is essential to its aesthetic effectiveness. In 1911, Georg Simmel (1965) argued that the ruin was epitomised by a half-decayed equilibrium. For Viennese art historian Alois Riegl, ruins were 'catalysts which trigger in the beholder a sense of the life cycle, of the emergence of the particular from the general and its gradual but inevitable dissolution back into the general' (1998, 624). Any attempt to re-establish human control over nature and to freeze a ruin in a condition that is halfway between intactness and decomposition is thus potentially self-defeating, since it may extinguish the ruin effect (Roth 1997a, 8, 18). Ruination processes vary in terms of their pace. Slow decay is 'ruin time' proper (Hetzler 1988), since it is most likely to reveal the signs of nature's inexorable reconquest of human structures. Slow dereliction resulting from quasi-anonymous human forces such as disinvestment from an urban centre can also produce hybrid mixes of culture and nature that look the same as ruins generated 'naturally' (Figures 1 and 2).

Various techniques have been used to prolong or intensify the ruin effect. A photograph or film image 'offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution', an 'illusion of control over eternity' (Smithson 1979, 57), but at the same time the physical decay of the celluloid film leads the viewer to imagine decay as progressing irresistibly. Like the monumental ruin, film stock thus holds decay and persistence in a kind of equipoise. The attractiveness of this feature of film is suggested by efforts to simulate the decay of

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FIGURE 1. 'Ruin time': Völklingen ironworks, Germany. From Burckhardt et al. (1997, 27). Reproduced courtesy of Edition Axel Menges.



FIGURE 2. 'Ruin time': Detroit, abandoned train station with overgrowth. Photograph by the author, June 2005.



FIGURE 3. Aerial view of the Jewish museum, Berlin, under construction. Reprinted from Libeskind (1995, 41) courtesy of Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan.

celluloid in digital films. Charles Merewether (1997, 33) discusses the architectural work of Daniel Libeskind, especially the Jewish Museum in Berlin, as seeking a point that is 'neither restoration nor erasure'. Libeskind is concerned 'with excavation because [he thinks] that the past cannot be erased, and that to build over the place of ruins would be suppression and a denial of what has come to pass'. Instead, Libeskind seeks to 'frame what is missing' by building an empty space into the heart of the museum itself. Libeskind (1995, 35) writes:

The void and the invisible are the structural features which I have gathered in this particular space ... The experience of the building is organized around a center which is not to be found ... What is not visible is the richness of the former Jewish contributions to Berlin. It cannot be found in artifacts because it has been turned into ash.

The ruins or ashes of history have been contained, framed, or evoked without any attempt to restore or efface them. The photograph at the end of the published version of this lecture (Figure 3) shows the museum under construction from above and missing its roof. In this photograph, the museum itself appears to be in ruins, just as the painter and first Louvre Museum director Robert Hubert painted the Louvre itself in ruins in 1796 while it was being built.

The more typical practice of *patching up* ruins in an effort to stall time is revealed a few blocks away from the

Jewish Museum in the shattered façade of the Anhalt railway station (Figure 4). A similar practice is evident in the keystone placed in the gateway of the Temple of Bacchus at Baalbek by the British in 1870, intended to prevent its collapse (Roth 1997b, 67). The serpent figures at the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at the Mexican Teotihuacan ruins were propped up by archaeologists during the nineteenth century. More recently, some of these figures have been removed to museums, and the entire ruin has been stabilised with concrete and rocks (Figure 5). At the French 'ruins of Oradour' (as they are described in the Oradour Memory Centre's official publications) the piles of stones have been cleared away so that visitors can move freely, and walls have been partly repaired, leaving the entire site in a state of suspended but not disorderly decay (Figures 6–7).

The extreme approach is to demolish ruins and clear away the rubble. With a few exceptions, this was the approach taken in the German cities after the Second World War and in Detroit since the beginning of the city's decline. The clearing of abandoned structures figures prominently in Detroit mayoral campaigns. When local artist Tyree Guyton created a metacommentary on the city's ruination by transforming abandoned houses along Heidelberg Street into artistic-political works, the city initially responded by tearing down and clearing away these 'hyper-ruins'. (More recently, the municipality has declared a truce with Guyton, and his installations have expanded into adjacent streets.)

It is possible therefore to distinguish several different ways of dealing with rubble, not all of which are mutually exclusive. At one extreme is the strategy of demolishing the remaining structures and removing all traces of them. This is the approach preferred by the municipal government in Detroit with respect to almost all abandoned buildings in the city. Residents and external groups might otherwise take these ruins as evidence of the city government's incompetence. Dilapidated structures can also be restored to their imagined original condition. From the standpoint of ruins, this strategy is equivalent to demolition, since it erases all traces of the passage of time. Detroit's Book-Cadillac Hotel, built in 1923–1924, stood abandoned and crumbling between 1984 and 2006 (Figure 8), but is currently undergoing a complete renovation. Nonetheless, traces of its period of ruination will be preserved in books (e.g. Kohrman 2002) and websites.



FIGURE 4. Façade of the Anhalter Bahnhof, Berlin, showing patching. Photograph by the author, June 2007.



FIGURE 5. Temple of the Feathered Serpent, Teotihuacan. Photograph by the author, May 2007.



FIGURE 6. Oradour in 1944. Photograph by Gérard Franceschi. Reprinted courtesy of Archives photographiques, Centre des monuments nationaux, Paris; Caisse National des Monuments et des Sites, Paris.



FIGURE 7. Oradour in 2004, with visiting tourists. Photograph by the author, August 2004.

At the opposite extreme from demolition and restoration, ruins are sometimes allowed to continue their natural course of decay. Typically, this is not an intentional strategy but simple neglect. As Riegl pointed out, before the Italian Renaissance intentional monuments were 'allowed to fall into decay as soon as those for whom they were erected and those who had an interest in preserving them had vanished' (1998, 626). Now that preservationist and conservationist technologies have proliferated, however, the strategy of deliberate non-intervention has emerged as a new meta-strategy, one that is closest to the core definition of the ruin. As one of Riegl's interpreters puts it, 'today we often prefer to keep the works of the past with all the marks of the time they have lived through rather than impoverish them in favour of a rejuvenation we no longer believe in' (Zerner 1976, 187). The 'self-destroying sculpture of Jean-Tinguley and others' is an example of this strategy, as is the vanishing monument 'Against Fascism, War and Violence – and for Peace and Human Rights' designed by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalv-Gerz (Young 2000, 131). The German-Namibian users seem to be allowing the site of the former POW camp at Au||geilgas to merge back into the earth precisely because of the 'romantic' effect that is thereby produced.

Intermediate strategies have been developed which *conserve* ruins in a semi-decayed state through the use of protective coverings, patching, supports (Figures 7–10) and, as Riegl himself pointed out, protective awnings (1998, 635). Photography, film, painting, and other recording technologies temporarily 'preserve' ruins by freezing time, although each of these media may itself begin to fray, yellow and rot. Sometimes new buildings arise on top of old structures, with the ruins remaining visible or retaining some sort of shadow presence.

THE RUINS OF NAMIBIA AND DETROIT: MELANCHOLIA VERSUS NOSTALGIA

Most of the Namibian ruins in question are the remains of the German colonial state, which lasted from 1884 to 1915. For most African Namibians this German colonial detritus is either noxious or invisible. It is the small population of German-speaking Namibians, numbering about 20 000, who have elevated this rubble to the more exalted status of ruins, through preservation, publications and guided tours (Mossolow 1954, 1955, 1968, 1971, 1993; Peters 1981; Vogt 2002a, 2004).² In recent years some Namibian-Germans (along with some black Namibians) have extended their focus to encompass the ruins of Namibia's pre-colonial past

(Dierks 1992). This post-colonial interest in Africanising the ruinscape is more than an extension of the European discourse of ruins into new settings. It also marks a division within the field of German-Namibian 'ruingazers' (Hell 2008) between those for whom the ruin functions primarily as an object for cultivating a posture of colonial melancholia, and others who have tried to integrate themselves into the post-colonial Namibian polity.

The dominant German-Namibian use of the colonial ruins, however, is oriented towards a specifically melancholy stance. On the one hand, these ruins allow the ruingazer to disavow the Germans' permanent loss of the colony. This involves a ghostly projection onto the ruins of the Germans' erstwhile colonial regime. The privileged objects used for such projection are the colonial state's 'defensive structures' or *Wehrbauten* – its fortresses, police stations, fortified houses and mission settlements, and prisons. The representation of these objects as ruins is one way of admitting that they will not be restored to their earlier functions. The ruinscape thus resonates with an ambivalent psychopolitical stance that simultaneously disavows and acknowledges the Germans' permanent loss of political sovereignty. This is a melancholic stance in the Freudian sense in so far as it cycles continuously between denial and recognition of loss without ever settling into a mournful bereavement (Freud 1917, 1923; also Baucom 1999; Clewell 2004; Gilroy 2005).

Detroit is widely known as the most impoverished and abandoned major city in America. The city's ruination is the result of racialised disinvestment and relocation, and the exodus of more than a million people to the suburbs and beyond since the 1950s (Sugrue 1996; Steinmetz and Chanan 2005). Most of the city's residents perceive the abandoned factories, office buildings, theaters, stations, stadiums, and houses as mere rubble or as breeding grounds for crime. A smaller group in the city represents these same structures as ruins, including artists Tyree Guyton and Lowell Boileau (see also Herron 1993; Watten 2003). Most of the ruingazers, however, are outsiders – suburbanites from metro Detroit and visitors from farther afield. Architects and urban planners have been fascinated by the possibilities of reusing Detroit's voids and ruins in ways that accept population decline (Daskalakis, Waldheim, and Young 2001; Oswald 2005). Photographer Camilo Vergara (1995, 1999) has documented the decay of Detroit and other northern US cities and called for the creation of an 'American acropolis' of abandoned office buildings in Detroit's downtown. Suburban ravers and adventurers consume



FIGURE 8. Ballroom of Detroit's Book-Cadillac Hotel. Reproduced with permission from Kohrman (2002, 121). Book available from the publisher online at www.arcadiapublishing.com.

the city's ruins through an exoticising vision of urban dystopia.

As in Namibia there is an established itinerary of ruins. Artist Boileau offers guided tours and created a website called the 'The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit', complete with 'Detroit ruins maps'.³ On many weekends there is a steady stream of middle-class visitors to Guyton's outdoor installation of rubbish art around Heidelberg Street, and suburban photographers can be found around the abandoned factories. In 2006 the travel section of the *New York Times* advised visitors to Detroit to view the Book-Cadillac Hotel and the Michigan Central Railroad Station. The author explicitly invoked an aestheticising ruins perspective:

Despite some recent progress, decades of economic struggle have left many once-grand Detroit buildings in ruins. But like ruins in Greece or Italy, these once mighty structures can exude a dilapidated wonder.... Most dramatic is the former Michigan Central Depot, its 18 blown-out floors looming against the sky, its railroad station interior looking like an abandoned Roman settlement. (Park 2005)

Comparisons to Greek and Roman ruins are ubiquitous in discussions of Detroit and of other modern and contemporary ruins (Hell 2008).

The largest group of non-locals participating in the representation of Detroit's ruins consists of white suburbanites who left the city or whose parents and grandparents fled a generation or two ago. Their perception of Detroit's abandoned structures seems initially to resemble German-Namibian colonial melancholy. Many follow a trail through the city's ruins that conjures up the shattered Fordist metropolis in its golden age. They follow this path virtually via websites and books, or, in the preferred method, by automobile. Bookstores in Detroit's suburbs carry shelves of paperbacks with sepia-toned covers published by Arcadia, an editor whose website describes its own books as being 'pretty much all nostalgia'.⁴ These volumes revisit the lost world of industrial prosperity and trace the arc of the city's rise and fall. The volume on Detroit's Statler and Book-Cadillac Hotels, for example, concludes with a chapter called 'The Hotels Today' that describes their decay. The photograph of the Statler Hotel's Grand Ballroom shows it littered with debris and with the ceiling collapsing. The caption accompanying this image reads: 'Once a center of activity, only the sound of passing People Mover trains breaks the silence' (Kohrman 2002, 112). The ballroom of the Book-Cadillac Hotel appears even more decrepit (Figure 8). The volume on Detroit's abandoned train station concludes with photographs shot through broken windows and images of 'ghosts of former travellers' inside the ruin (Figure 9). Local

documentaries about Detroit almost invariably follow a similar ‘rise-and-fall’ narrative structure, in which a description of the vibrant life of a neighbourhood, building or institution is followed by a mournful disquisition on its decline.⁵ A locally made film on the Hudson’s Building culminates in its dramatic demolition in 1998 (Glaser 1997; also Woods 1996).

Suburban ex-Detroiters tend to be less ambivalent toward ‘their’ ruins than the German-Namibians. Most of the relevant texts, films and tours that resurrect Fordist Detroit are unambiguous about the fact that this prosperous city is located in the past. Admittedly many of these representations imply a continuing sense of ownership over the city. The monthly magazine *Detroit Hour* is addressed to the residents of Detroit’s wealthy suburbs, and is filled with glossy advertisements for plastic surgery and expensive restaurants, but it organises its entire system of representations around the signifier ‘Detroit’. The belief among many African-American Detroiters that suburban whites want to retake the city is expressed in a widespread conspiracy theory concerning an alleged 50-year plan to depopulate and recolonise Detroit.⁶ But suburbanites with roots in the city do not seem to be stuck in the same sort of melancholic cycle as the Namibian-Germans. The Fordist city serves more as an object for historical contemplation than for the projection of ambivalent wishful fantasies of resettlement. The dominant emotional condition is a simpler one – *nostalgia for Fordism*. This is a desire to relive the past, to re-experience the bustling metropolis as it is remembered or has been described. But most suburbanites have transferred their deeper investments, both psychic and economic, to the suburbs and beyond.

This stands in contrast to the German-Namibians, most of whom have no home other than Namibia, even if they visit Germany frequently. Their unofficial national anthem, ‘The Southwestern Song’, proclaims their love for German ‘Southwest’ (Walther 2002, 189), as do most of their literary, historical and artistic productions (Rüdiger 1993). The German-Namibians have been analysed as having constructed an ethnic culture during the past ninety years that is more than a simple copy of metropolitan German culture (Rüdiger and Weiland 1992; Schmidt-Lauber, 1993, 1998; Wentenschuh 1995; Förster 2004). Their identity is rooted in a deep admiration for their own colonial past, a past that tends to be understood not as genocidal or imperialist but as having laid the foundations for Namibian development. The introduction to the 1985 volume published by the Interest Group of German-Speaking Southwesterners, or



FIGURE 9. Installation by Deborah Riley in Detroit’s abandoned train station. Reproduced with permission from Kavanaugh (2001, 118). Book available from the publisher online at www.arcadiapublishing.com.

IG (Interessengemeinschaft Deutschsprachiger Südwestler) entitled *Vom Schutzgebiet bis Namibia* [From Protectorate to Namibia] emphasised the group’s ‘pride’ in ‘the contribution of Germans to the development of German Southwest Africa, Southwest Africa and Namibia’ (Becker and Hecker 1985, 9). Most German-Namibians see themselves as inherently superior, not only to indigenous Namibians, but also to the Boers, although post-apartheid political culture has made such feelings more difficult to express openly. According to one native informant, many German-Namibians continue to ‘reveal a deeply rooted refusal of “the Other”, especially the Black’, and have extended this ‘racism ... to new social groups, be it the *fat cats* [in English in the original text] or the new German immigrants’ (Mühr 2004, 244–5). Unlike suburban ex-Detroiters, they have not severed their residential and affective ties with the geospace that they once controlled. The fantasy of regaining their dominant position as the country’s rulers coexists with sober recognition of the impossibility of ever attaining that goal.

Naturally, the phrases ‘German-Namibians’ and ‘suburban ex-Detroiters’ designate dominant tendencies, not generalisations about entire groups. No matter how often governments and social movements insist that nations or ethnic groups are entirely homogeneous, it is a sociological truism that no group is internally uniform except under exceptional circumstances. During the German colonial period, even government officials were divided against themselves with respect to their views of Namibians and their preferred approach to colonial governance. Officials also differed from missionaries and settlers, who disagreed in turn among themselves (Steinmetz 2007, ch. 3). Part of the internal heterogeneity within any group consists precisely in disagreements about the very boundaries of the group in question (Barth 1969; Tilly 1978; Bourdieu 1984; Brubaker 2002). The coherence of the category of ‘white’ German-Namibians is the historically constituted result of shifting strategies of inclusion and exclusion since the German colonial period (Schulte-Althoff 1985; Wildenthal 2001). Like all social groups, it is not just the external boundaries that are created through active processes of definition. Pierre Bourdieu has done more than any other theorist to draw attention to the fact that all social groups and social fields are criss-crossed by lines of differentiation and axes of polarisation, domination and conflict. Bourdieu has shown how social practices tend to configure themselves into semi-autonomous fields of action that are defined by heterogeneity, conflict and hierarchies of valued symbolic capital.

These statements about the constructedness of any group cohesion and the polarisation or fragmentation within such groups are true of both the German-Namibians and the ‘white suburban ex-Detroiters’. Before 1914 most Europeans in the Namibian protectorate were Germans. The racial privileges characteristic of all modern colonies created certain common interests and identifications among these Germans, as did emergency situations like the wars of 1904–1907 and the two world wars. At the same time, the Germans in Southwest Africa were divided against one another by social class origin, both within the colonial state (Steinmetz 2007) and in the colonial field of power more generally (Steinmetz 2008). Once Southwest Africa came under the control of the Union of South Africa, which governed it as a League of Nations ‘Class C’ colony after 1920, the Germans became a dominated national group within the dominant colonising population. The German-Namibian population became more culturally cohesive as a result, and soon began to press for political

representation and cultural autonomy. Yet even during the 1930s, when 80–95% of the German-speakers in Southwest Africa supported Hitler, some members of the older generation opposed the Nazis (Stuebel 1953, 176; Walther 2002, ch. 9). In the late 1970s, some German-Namibians formed the above-mentioned IG, which contained a more liberal political tendency than had been previously seen among this ethnic group (Hess 2004). A delegation of IG members met with South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) leader Sam Nujoma (Rüdiger 1993, 19), and some German-Namibians even joined SWAPO, including the former Namibian ambassador to Germany Hanno Rumpf (recently replaced by Peter Katjavivi) and the engineer and amateur historian Klaus Dierks (Rüdiger 1993, 19; Lautenschlager 2003). Nowadays the ethnic nationalism of many younger German-Namibians is somewhat attenuated (Mühr 2004, 24). The main German-Namibian newspapers, magazines and publishing houses continue to articulate the colonial-melancholic position discussed here,⁷ although this position is occasionally confronted with alternative views.

Suburban white ex-Detroiters are also divided by social class and, what is centrally important to the current discussion, by their stance toward the city that they or their ancestors inhabited. I discovered this heterogeneity of stances towards Detroit among ex-Detroiters while making and especially while screening the film *Detroit: Ruin of a City* (Steinmetz and Chanan 2005; Steinmetz 2006). Some white suburbanites acknowledge the racism and class exploitation that permeated everyday life in Detroit during the Fordist era, and are less prone to idealise that period.⁸ But many white suburban workers or descendants of industrial Detroit workers continue to idealise the Fordist period.

A minority of these suburbanites are white supremacists who see the city’s ruins as evidence of the incompetence of the African-American majority and city leadership. In addition to the racist ‘Stormfront’ website on Detroit ruins,⁹ there is a white supremacist punk rock band called ‘Angry Aryans’ allegedly based in Macombe County just north of the Detroit city limits that has songs with titles like ‘North Side of 8-mile’ (the name of the road at Detroit’s northern border), ‘Carjacked in Detroit’, and ‘Browntown Burning Down’, the last with the lyrics:

Driving through the city, blackened ghetto is all you see

Direct result of permitting the niggers to run free

They destroy their own community and
shoot each other down
Abandoned homes are torched to ashes
Inner Zulu tribal clashes
Browntown burning down
Cities getting sacked, it's coming down
Browntown burning down
Negro in flames rolling on the ground
No longer welcome in our cities 'cause you'll
get beat
Extreme White racial violence!
Is what the darkies can expect to meet

Both the benign nostalgics and the white supremacists see postwar Fordism through rose-coloured glasses, but at the same time their memories are rooted in actual historical realities of postwar Fordism. By *Fordism* I am referring to the regime of capitalist accumulation and social, political and cultural regulatory practices that was hegemonic in most of Western Europe and North America roughly between 1945 and 1973 (Aglietta 1979). Fordism does not refer here specifically to the production processes or company policies of the Ford Motor Company, even if the concept did originate with the system pioneered by Ford in the first decades of the twentieth century (Gottl-Ottlilienfeld 1924; Gramsci 1971). The United States variant of Fordism is distinguished by the importance of anti-black racism. This racism took specific forms in northern cities like Detroit, where most blacks were limited to menial, dangerous and poorly paid jobs in the automobile industry, and where residential segregation was enforced both informally and politically by white homeowners associations and realtors (Sugrue 1996).¹⁰ Although many regulation theorists have focused on countries like Germany and Sweden, with their more fully developed national welfare states and neo-corporatist systems of interest intermediation, there is no contained region where Fordism was more completely, concretely and precociously instantiated than in Detroit in the middle third of the twentieth century. Walter Reuther's 1950 'Treaty of Detroit' with General Motors (GM) was a model of the neo-corporatist labour-management agreements that proliferated in the United States and Western Europe during the Fordist era. GM was protected from strikes while the United Auto Workers (UAW) gained health, unemployment and pension benefits, expanded vacation time and 'a guaranteed 20 percent increase in their standard of living over the next half-decade, with wages rising due to both increases in the cost of living and improved productivity' (Lichtenstein 1995, 280; see also Bell 1950). The Fordist coalition bridged the working and managerial classes, in so far as wage increases were pegged to rising productivity. Because white workers were centrally involved in this Fordist formation it is more

accurate to speak of white domination than white hegemony in Detroit before the 1970s. The cross-class community of interests forged by this system is responsible for the fact that nostalgia for Fordism has not been extremely class-stratified, even if is racialized and nationalistic.¹¹

Like melancholia, nostalgia reveals a hysteresis of the imaginary, a desire to continue inhabiting imaginary identifications that have become disjointed from present-day social-symbolic realities. Both types of psychic process are based in dissatisfaction with the present. As historian David Lowenthal (1985, 10) notes, nostalgia was originally a medical condition that combined 'the Greek *nosos*', meaning 'to return to native land', and *algos*, meaning 'suffering or grief.... Swiss mercenaries throughout Europe were nostalgia's first victims.' Current uses of the term retain this original reference to loss. According to psychoanalyst Liliane Fainsilber (2005, 217), 'fantasms mask the nostalgia that we feel before the irremediable loss of the object'. However, this seems to collapse nostalgia into bereavement. Nostalgia is better defined as the sense of having lost an entire sociohistorical context and the identifications bound up with it. It is not the same thing as the loss of a loved person. It is a fantasmic desire to re-experience a social past. Usually this refers to a past that one has experienced oneself, but it also encompasses historical situations mediated by the descriptions of people with whom one identifies.

Nostalgia thus defined is an almost universal condition, but it is accentuated in rapidly changing, highly mobile societies and periods like the present. And it can be channelled in widely different ways. The tourist and culture industries have tapped into existing wellsprings of nostalgia, as have social movements that violently reject the present. Contemporary far right movements, for example, promise to re-establish the lost Fordist utopia by assaulting people and groups they see as responsible for their socioeconomic plight, such as immigrants, Jews and the handicapped (Steinmetz 1997). But most suburban ex-Detroiters believe they are better off than their urban ancestors were, and do not want to resurrect the past. Nostalgia for most of them is turned in more anodyne directions, despite the extreme examples of racism given above.

Melancholy is a more complex and ambivalent subjective posture. It is an even older term than nostalgia, one that also referred originally to an illness caused by an excess of 'black bile' (Burton 1621). But it had become a more psychological malady by the

seventeenth century. By the time Freud gave melancholia its contemporary definition it referred mainly to the inability to acknowledge the loss of a loved person with whom one was deeply identified. Even violent expressions of nostalgia recognise that history has moved forward. The melancholic subject, by contrast, both recognises and disavows his loss, forming identifications that are symbolically 'illegal', clinging to objects that were 'loved not as separate and distinct from [himself] but rather as a mirror of [his] own sense of self and power' (Hell 2002). The melancholic may become oriented toward fetish objects like the German-Namibian ruins – objects that both point to and hide the threat of loss (Freud 1963).

The comparison between a post-colonial African country and a post-industrial North American city is intended to compare and contrast the emotional posture of previously dominant white groups and the symbolic role that ruins come to play for them. What these two populations have in common is their loss of political and social sovereignty to representatives of a majority African or African-American population (Namibia's population is 95% indigenous African; Detroit's is 85% African-American). In neither case has the 'white' group in question disappeared from the scene. In both situations this group expresses a heightened interest in the material debris from the period in which it was locally dominant. At the same time, the ruins index a history viewed as objectionable, even disastrous, by many members of the groups currently holding political power. There is intense disagreement about the very ontological status of these remnants, including whether they are ruins or simply garbage.

The situations of the two politically displaced white groups and their ruins cultures also differ in several fundamental ways. One concerns their assessment of the present situation. German-Namibians' obsessive focus on colonial defensive structures and military history is indicative not just of their fixation on the colonial period but also of a more immediate, acute sense of danger. This runs like a red thread through German-Namibian history, starting with the murder of civilians and soldiers by Ovaherero rebels in 1904, and continuing with the Germans' deportation and imprisonment by the South African army in the two world wars. These settlers experienced the African independence movements between 1960 and the end of the 1980s as an escalating series of threats (Esslinger 2002, 498). Most recently German-Namibians have focused on the 'time bomb' of extreme economic inequality and the menace of land occupations, 'Africanisation' of employment and crime.

German-Namibians' central memory shrine, the old fortress (Alte Feste) in Windhoek, is now occupied by a permanent exhibition on Namibian struggles against colonialism and apartheid, although the infamous equestrian statue of the German colonial soldier still stands provocatively in front of the fortress (Steinmetz and Hell 2006). This group's emphasis on ruined fortresses corresponds to their fortress mentality. But while these structures gesture toward protection, their very ruination alludes at the same time to the settlers' vulnerability. Detroit suburbanites' sense of danger is more vicarious, mediated mainly through the obsessive focus of the local news broadcasters on lurid urban crime stories. There is also a myth about crime emanating from Detroit to the suburbs, incited by the long-serving progressive mayor Coleman Young himself:

Everyone 'knew' that Coleman Young was a bitter racist who hated all whites. He wanted to drive them out of Detroit, something many of them today give him credit for doing. After all, he had, everyone also 'knew', told the palefaces to 'hit Eight Mile Road', and said blacks needed guns to 'defend' themselves against them. You can find people, even today, at coffee shops from Clarkston to Clawson, who will swear they heard him say those things with their own ears.... But even his most shocking remarks, which by now have become legends in their own right, look quite different in print than in legend. What he actually said, in his first inaugural address back in 1974, was this: 'To all those pushers, to all rip-off artists, to all muggers: It's time to leave Detroit; hit Eight Mile Road! And I don't give a damn if they are black or white, or if they wear Superfly suits or blue windows with silver badges. Hit the road!' Later, bewildered by the intensity of the reaction, he said, 'I thought that was innocent enough; I was the new marshal telling the bad guys to get out of Dodge.' (Lessenberry 1997)

For years, Detroit has had one of the highest murder rates in the country, but most suburbanites do not see this as a menace for themselves.

These two contexts also differ with respect to their inherited culture of ruins. The Germans who initially settled in Namibia during the nineteenth century were heirs to a discourse on ruins with roots in Romanticism and German historicism – a culture in which particular value was attached to the unique historical event or object, including the ruin. This Romantic-historicist approach to ruins continued to evolve during the Nazi era, culminating in Albert Speer's 'theory of ruin value'



FIGURE 10. Image from Anselm Kiefer's Paris 'Monumenta' show 'Sternenfall' (2007). Photograph by the author, July 2007.



FIGURE 11. Image from Anselm Kiefer's Paris 'Monumenta' show 'Sternenfall' (2007). Photograph by the author, July 2007.



FIGURE 12. Nuestra Señora de los Remedios church atop the Great Pyramid at Cholula, Mexico, with uncovered prehispanic ruins in foreground. Photograph by the author, May 2007.

(Featherstone 2005; Hell 2008). It continues into the present, as evidenced by the work of W. G. Sebald (Hell 2004) and Anselm Kiefer's 2007 Paris 'Monumenta' show (Figures 10–11). In the United States, by contrast, ruins are rarely allowed to continue to decay, except unintentionally; and they are almost never conserved in a half-decayed equilibrium. This lack of interest in ruins is the result, most obviously, of the fact that the United States has only ever known capitalism and of America's relentless orientation towards the future. Even the emergence of a 'postmodern' touristic interest in heritage sites emphasises fully restored and sanitised pre-industrial destinations like colonial Williamsburg (Barthel 1990). None of the UNESCO World Heritage sites in the continental United States are ruins of post-conquest Euro-American buildings, and only three (Cahokia, Chaco and Puebla de Taos) are ruins of Native American civilisations.

Another difference between the two contexts has to do with colonisers' perceptions of the status of ruins *among the colonised*. Sub-Saharan Africa has long been described as being almost devoid of the physical remnants of ancient and pre-colonial civilisations. The ruins in the New World, by contrast, were viewed by nineteenth-century Europeans through the same lens as Napoleon's Orientalist contributors to *Description de l'Égypte* (Davis 1981; Charnay 2007). In each case, the

colonisers and their descendents differentiated themselves from the colonised through ruins. Europeans perceived the *paucity* of sub-Saharan African ruins as a sign of civilisational inferiority.¹² In America and Asia, early colonisers regarded ruined temples and cities as signs of civilisational decadence (e.g. Stenz 1899, 3). Pre-Columbian 'artefacts and ruins in Mexico and other parts of America were reviled' and often 'hastily reburied, so disturbing was their presence and its implications', since they 'represented the barbarous and primitive religions of the pre-colonial' (Thomas 1999, 96). Confronted with the abandoned Great Pyramid of Cholula in Mexico, the Spanish colonisers built a church on top of it (Figure 12). European colonisers and their descendents in the Americas tried to avoid calling attention to the ruins of their own settlement – for instance, at Jamestown in Virginia – since this threatened to cast them into the same savage slot as their colonial subjects. All of this began to change during the nineteenth century with the growth of scientific archaeology and the emerging belief in the inevitable extinction of colonised peoples, which transformed the indigenous American from 'a bloodthirsty demon into a noble savage' (Berkhofer 1978, 88). Now there was increased interest in the 'stately edifices' of the native 'American race', which 'speak to us so eloquently of a noble culture', as the editor of *North American Review*

put it (Rice 1880, 89). But the different starting points for European colonisers in Africa and America have continued to shape perceptions of ruins into the present.¹³

Detroit and Namibia also differ in more obvious ways. If the population of Namibia and Detroit was approximately the same size in the middle of the twentieth century, one was at the cutting edge of industrial modernity while the other was organised around agrarian and extractive industries. Nor should one understate the difference between the policies of genocide and apartheid in Southwest Africa and forms of racial oppression in twentieth-century Detroit. Southwest Africa was a colony in an obscure part of Africa, while Detroit held a central symbolic place in the American imaginary as a key site of modern technical innovation, working-class militancy and upward mobility, and after the 1970s as the largest black-governed city in the United States.

THE GERMAN-NAMIBIAN RUIN CULT

The German-speaking Namibian community has been largely responsible for creating Namibia's itinerary of national monuments. After the National Party won the South African elections in 1948 the German-Namibians were turned into a 'pillar of the new ... Apartheid society in Southwest Africa' (Rüdiger 1993, 15). The 'Historical Monuments Commission for Southwest Africa', created in October 1948, was dominated by German-Namibians (Vogt 2002b, 251). Of the 117 sites declared as national monuments between 1950 and 1990, 77 were German structures from the pre-1918 period. Indeed, after an initial burst of classifying non-German sites as national monuments in the 1950s and 1960s, nearly all of the objects (61 out of 72) consecrated after 1968 were from the German colonial era (Vogt 2004, Appendix 1). A project sponsored by the Namibian Architects Institute during the 1980s inventoried every German colonial building in the country's five main cities.

Starting in the 1940s the Scientific Society's *Annual* printed photographs and discussions of colonial ruins.¹⁴ German-Namibian Dr N. Mossolow published photographs of the ruins of German military and missionary structures, and his books on nineteenth-century German-Namibian mission stations follow the 'rise and decline' narrative structure. These books ended with photographs of the ruins of the mission churches in the 1950s and 1960s and their covers were printed in the 'nostalgic' sepia colour also found on the Arcadia books

on Detroit (Mossolow 1993, 58; also Mossolow 1966, 71, 103; 1969, Figure 15). One of the most active preservationists in Namibia since 1990, Andreas Vogt, published his dissertation on the colonial defence structures in 2002. Vogt insists that the list of officially protected monuments in Namibia 'should not be understood as an expression of a colonial mentality' (2002b, 254). His more recent book (2004) integrates the German period into a longer timeline of Namibian history.

The Germans' loss of colonial power and the sometimes precarious political status of those who remained in the colony meant that most of the pre-1918 defence structures that were not useful to the new South African regime began immediately to fall into ruin after the First World War. Until 1943, however, German-Namibians continued to hope that they would regain control over the colony, and avoided treating their rubble as ruins. The Nazis promised to 'bring Southwest back to the Reich' (Rüdiger 1993, 76). After Stalingrad, however, Hitler dissolved the Nazi Colonial Office (*Kolonialpolitisches Amt*), and with the German capitulation it became obvious that Germany would not regain its overseas colonies.

The German-Namibians now developed a new stance towards the ruins and monuments, one that contributed to the formation of colonial melancholy. They created a ruinscape that functioned as a sort of melancholic ideological apparatus, a machine for cultivating a melancholic structure of feeling around the colonial past. On the one hand, the ruins and the rituals performed by German-Namibians around these sites (Förster 2004) conjure up a ghostly reminder of the erstwhile German colonial state, stimulating a kind of colonial dreamwork (Mitchell 1994). This is linked to a collective disavowal of that state's demise. On the other hand, by preserving many of the ruins in a half-decayed state or by allowing them to continue their return to the earth, German-Namibians underscore the pastness of that colonial state.

The German-Namibians are not irrelevant to the country's African present. They are the wealthiest ethnic group in Namibia. The German government is Namibia's largest source of international development and technical aid. With their ruins and monuments, the German-Namibians have contributed to the *haunting* of the post-colonial Namibian nation (Zeller 2000). However politically disempowered and few in number, these settlers are engaged in a campaign of low-level symbolic interference with the very cultural foundations



FIGURE 13. Ruins of the German colonial army fortress at Heusis (von François Fortress), present condition. Reproduced courtesy of http://www.klausdierks.com/Namibia_Photos/Namibia_Central.htm.



FIGURES 14–16. Top: station at Naiams, original condition (source: Grosser Generalstab 1907, 113); middle: ruins of the Naiams station before 1967 (reprinted courtesy of National Archives of Namibia, photograph no. 2635); bottom: partially restored ruins of the Naiams station, present condition (photograph courtesy of Dr Andreas Vogt, Windhoek/Namibia).

of the Namibian polity. Most indigenous Namibians would love to be rid of these settlers and their ghosts. Former Namibian President and SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma is close to Robert Mugabe, who was invited to Namibia for an official four-day visit in February 2007. SWAPO parliamentarians in the Namibian National Assembly ‘refused to even listen to an opposition motion on rights violations in Zimbabwe’ in 2007, and the current lands minister warned that the ‘willing-buyer, willing-seller concept’ has been unable to satisfy Namibians’ land hunger, hinting at more aggressive measures.¹⁵ But Namibia’s leaders know that African states cannot expropriate white-owned farms and businesses without running the risk of international ostracism, disinvestment and loss of aid (Kempton and Du Preez 1997). This is one reason why there has also been little movement to rid the landscape of colonial monuments, even though the government has added new nationalist monuments and has started to protect historical sites linked to anti-colonial struggles and pre-colonial indigenous culture.

The German-Namibians’ fetishisation of the colonial ruinscape perpetuates their sense of loss indefinitely. The persistent denial of the 1904–1908 colonial genocide by some German-Namibians is related to this melancholic ‘inability to mourn’. The daily *Allgemeine Zeitung* gives a voice to ‘historian’ Claus Nordbruch, who denies the 1904 colonial genocide. The 2002 re-edition of the volume *From Protectorate to Namibia* attempts to establish a new consensual framework for German-Namibians, one that acknowledges the end of colonialism and apartheid, but it recycles the colonial trope of Germany ‘pacifying’ Namibia and treats the 1904 German-Ovaherero war solely from the standpoint of German sacrifices (Alten 2002). The chapter on General von Trotha’s massacre of the Ovaherero ignores research by professional historians and insists that ‘modern warfare has become deliberate genocide’ *tout court*. The author compares von Trotha in 1904 to the ‘extermination pilots’ who bombed Hiroshima and Dresden, and to Russian soldiers who carried out ‘orders to rape and murder’ Germans in 1945, equating German perpetrators with their victims (Rust 2002, 483).

DEFENCE MECHANISMS

Several colonial historians have argued that the original, core structures of the colonial state are the military station, the fortress, the barracks and the prison (King 1990; von Trotha 1990). This seems debatable even for Southwest Africa, where the original proto-colonial and colonial structures were missionary



FIGURE 17. The Eros Fort outside Windhoek, built in 1893, present condition. Photograph courtesy of Dr Andreas Vogt, Windhoek/Namibia.



FIGURE 18. The Eros Fort outside Windhoek, built in 1893, present condition. Photograph courtesy of Dr Andreas Vogt, Windhoek/Namibia.

stations, trading outlets and copper mines. Nonetheless, it is true that the locally active Rhenish mission society did not abstain from military violence. One of the oldest mission stations to the Ovaherero, at Otjimbingwe, was founded in 1849. It became an early site of European settlement in the 1850s after copper was discovered in the area. The owner of the Matchless Copper Mine, Charles John Andersson, built a series of forts with cannons at Otjimbingwe. Andersson sold his properties to the Rhenish Missionary Society in the 1860s. German missionaries contributed to the escalation of internal violence during the 1860s by selling weapons and arming the Ovaherero for their 'war of liberation' in 1863 against domination by Khoikhoi Orlam groups (Andersson 1987–1989, vol. 2, 236–48). In a photograph from the period it is obvious that the first mission church at Okahandja was built like a small crenellated fortress.¹⁶ In 1872 the mission created a defensive tower at



FIGURES 19–20. Top: ruins of the German colonial army post at Aullgeilgas, Namibia, present condition (photograph courtesy of Dr Andreas Vogt, Windhoek/Namibia); bottom: ruins of the former German police post at Hohenfels in the Sperrgebiet, present condition (source: Rothmann and Rothmann 1999, 78, reproduced courtesy of ST Promotions).

Otjimbingwe. The National Monuments Council designated this tower a protected monument in its first year of activity (1950) and it was restored in 1993.¹⁷ This tower is not in ruins, of course, but the rest of the colonial-era German military structures at Otjimbingwe have disappeared without a trace.

The Germans built dozens of forts and police stations in the colony. Many of these have vanished, but they are catalogued tirelessly by German-Namibian historians. The first fortress was erected at Tsaobis in October 1898 and was already abandoned and missing its two-storey tower in 1905 (Schwabe 1899, 13; von François 1899, 50). Except for a few traces of the foundation, it has disappeared entirely (Vogt 2002a, 165). The fortress at Gochas on the border to British Bechuanaland (Botswana) at the edge of the Kalahari Desert was evacuated in 1915 and never used again; the entire complex was in ruins by 1923 and has now vanished entirely. It has been catalogued by Vogt (2002a, 107) and there are photographs of it in the National Archives of Namibia (an important storehouse for German-Namibian collective memory).



FIGURE 21. Baker's house at Kolmanskop. From Kohl and Schoeman 2004, plate 8. Reproduced courtesy of Klaus Hess Verlag.

Several fortresses have been partly rebuilt without being restored to their original condition. The colonial army built a fortress in 1890 at Heusis in the Khomas highlands west of Windhoek to protect the road from Otjimbingwe to the new colonial capital, which was declared a national monument in 1957. The fort's return to nature has been arrested and overgrowth removed, but the structure has not been rebuilt and its roof has not been replaced (Figure 13). The Naiams fortress (Figure 14) was built in 1898, and one officer and fifteen soldiers were stationed there. As can be seen in Figure 15, this fort was severely deteriorated by 1967, when it was declared a national monument. Since then it has been partly reconstructed (Figure 16), but the roof and other attached structures visible in the early image have not been replaced (Vogt 2002a, 108–10). A similar structure is the 'Eros Fort', originally a roofless redoubt with a small tower near Windhoek that was built during the first German war with the Witbooi in 1893. It was declared a

national monument in 1951, and was restored during the 1950s by the Windhoek Municipality (Figures 17–18).

Another set of forts are unprotected and continue to fade back into the earth. The army post at Au||geilgas (Figure 19) is not a protected monument and has not been fully restored. But the German members of the Historical Monuments Commission already started 'early on to concern themselves with [its] preservation and maintenance' (Vogt 2002a, 59). As the photograph shows, it is much less intact than the two forts just discussed, but it is better preserved than the German police posts at Hohenfels and at the Waterberg, neither of which has been maintained at all (Figure 20).¹⁸

Sand is one of main sources of ruination in Namibia, as can be seen most dramatically in the ghost towns of the old diamond-mining area along the Atlantic coast south of Lüderitz. After diamonds were discovered in 1908, the colonial administration created a 100-kilometre



FIGURE 22. Ruins of the prisoner of war camp at Aus, 1920. From Bruwer 2003, 29. Courtesy of National Archives of Namibia.



FIGURE 23. The remains of the prisoner of war camp at Aus, present day. Courtesy of National Archives of Namibia.

Sperrgebiet (restricted area) that encompassed the towns of Kolmanskop, Elizabeth Bay, Pomona and Bogenfels. In 1943 the main diamond company, Consolidated Diamond Mines (CDM), moved its operational headquarters from Kolmanskop to Oranjemund on the South African border. By 1956 Kolmanskop and the other German-era diamond mining towns were deserted. In 1980, CDM restored some of old buildings and established a museum, marketing Kolmanskop and Elizabeth Bay as tourist destinations. More interesting in the present context is the way these diamond towns were ignored until recently by the guardians of German-Namibian collective memory (with the exception of Lüderitz, where some of the German diamond prospectors' villas were declared national monuments before 1990; Kohl and Schoeman 2004). German-Namibians tend to associate these ruins not with heroic militarism but with the crass, capitalist aspects of colonial history (Figure 21).

One collection of military rubble that is felt to be extremely meaningful is the prisoner of war camp at Aus, where German troops, non-commissioned officers and members of the colonial police were interned by South African Union forces between the Germans'



FIGURE 24. Heidelberg Street area, aerial view, 2002. Assembled by the author with help from Karl Longstreth from the publicly available DTE maps at http://techtools.culma.wayne.edu/media/low_res/aerial_photos/index.htm.

capitulation in 1915 and the end of the First World War. As the literature on this camp emphasises, the prisoners constructed their own dwellings from unbaked mud bricks and salvaged pieces of corrugated iron. Thus ‘the ruins of the POWs’ huts’ are said to ‘bear testimony to how these POWs, under extreme conditions, showed initiative and made their life in the camp more dignified’. Though they had surrendered to the South African forces, the Germans ‘*did not surrender* to the harsh challenges of Aus’ (Vogt 2004, 81; my emphasis). The site was declared a national monument in 1985 and a memorial stone was unveiled with a bronze plaque depicting a soldier of the German colonial army. But the original structures have been allowed to continue to erode. This is noteworthy since the Aus camp represents for German-Namibians both the last chapter of their heroic military phase in the region and the beginning of their long series of defeats during the twentieth century. A book about the site by a member of the Monuments Commission comments laconically that ‘little remains to be seen of these huts except some ruins’ and continues

in a distinctly melancholic vein: ‘the transitory nature of ... the inanimate constructions’ focuses the visitor’s attention on the transitoriness of ‘their interwoven human stories’ (Bruwer 2003, 3, 12). Photographs in this book show that the camp was already in ruins in 1920 (Figure 22). Those who commemorate the suffering of the German POWs seem to prefer the site in its ruined state (Figure 23).

THE RUINS OF DETROIT AND FORDIST NOSTALGIA

Whereas German-Namibians are drawn most powerfully to the ruins of military structures, white suburbanites around Detroit focus on the vestiges of the social system of Fordism. The prosperous city grew rapidly, peaking at around two million in the mid-1950s. Just as the rise of Fordism created twentieth-century Detroit, the demise of Fordism has been responsible for Detroit’s extreme impoverishment and for peculiarities of its ruination, such as the large numbers of abandoned downtown high-rise office buildings. Detroit is thus in many ways

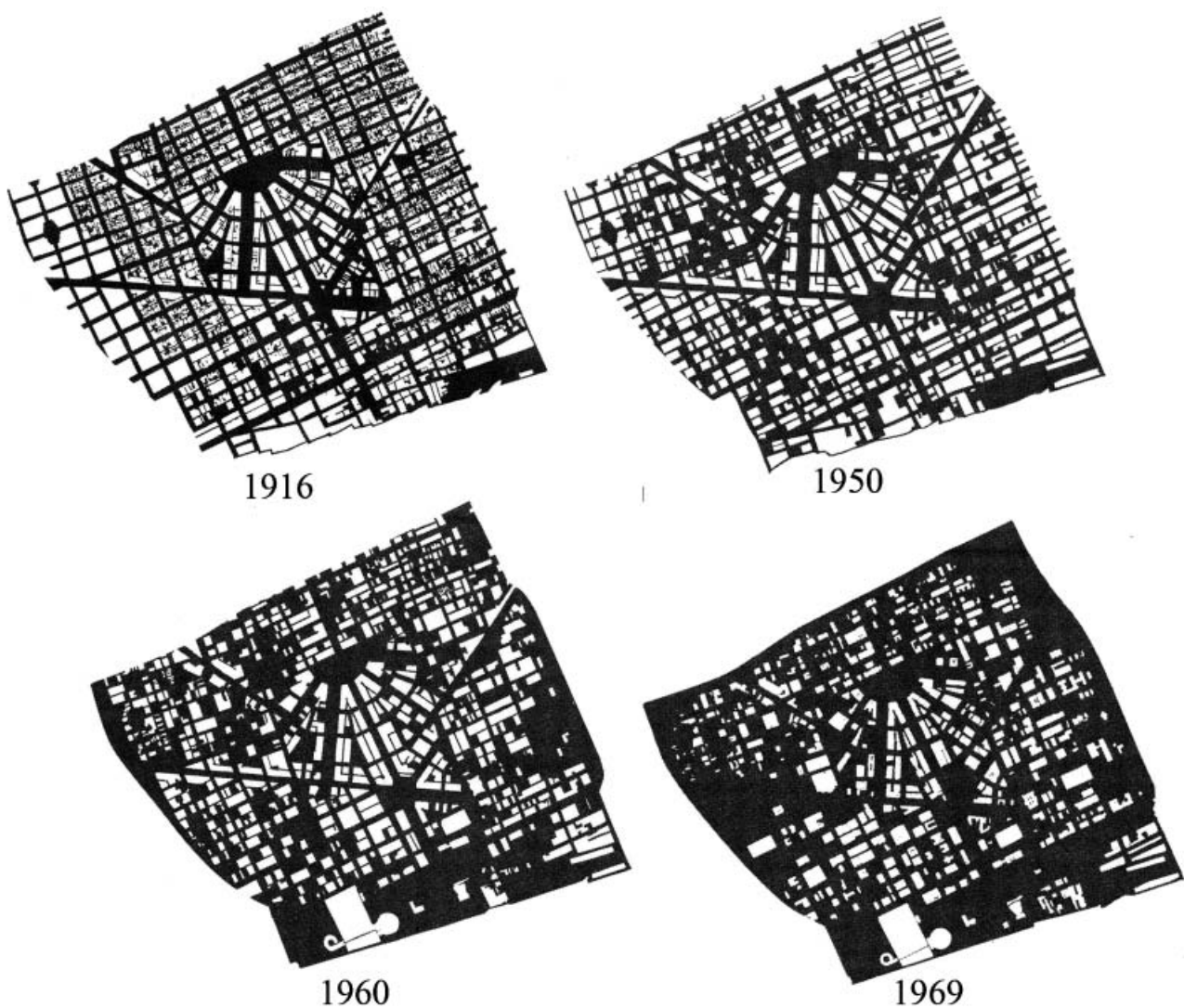


FIGURE 25. The patterning of empty spaces continues to reflect Detroit's original hub-and-spoke urban plan. Reprinted from Doxiadis 1970, 157, courtesy of Detroit Edison Company.

the ultimate museum and ruin of Fordism. Major traffic arteries cut directly through the city, linking Ford's two major assembly-line manufacturing complexes in Highland Park, an enclave municipality surrounded by Detroit, and Dearborn, adjacent to Detroit. But the Highland Park plant has long been abandoned. Hundreds of automobile and auto parts manufacturing plants were scattered throughout the city, but most are now empty (Babson 1984, 242). An entire sprawling city is thus crisscrossed by roads serving decommissioned shells of factories and leading to empty lots where buildings once stood. Fire hydrants guard the entrances of streets and alleys that no longer exist – for example, along the service drive that parallels Interstate Highway 75, which follows the course of Hastings Street.¹⁹ Other abandoned factories include the Packard plant, the Fisher Body 21 plant and the Kelsey-Hayes wheel

manufacturing plant. Many of Detroit's factory shells burn to the ground, while others are demolished, like the Uniroyal tyre plant, whose destruction in 1985 left only a few skeletal remnants of structures on a vast and polluted brownfield site along the Detroit riverfront.

Unlike many eastern US cities, Detroit became a low-rise metropolis of working-class houses. Auto workers' comparatively high wages allowed many to buy their own homes. White homeowners' associations prevented most large public housing projects from being built in the city (Sugrue 1996). The urban electric railway system was phased out as workers began to purchase their own cars (O'Geran 1931; Andrews 1945), and the 1951 Detroit Master Plan projected a network of new urban expressways that would bring suburban workers to and from the city.²⁰



FIGURE 26. *Terrain vague*, Detroit. Photograph by the author.

The footprint of this racialised Fordist urbanism is the structural foundation of the city's forlorn appearance in the present. The exodus of jobs and white workers left behind an ocean of abandoned houses, many of which reveal the charring of recent fires. Detroit is obviously different from the German-Namibian ruinscape in that the ruins of Fordism index an ongoing emergency. As a result, many of the ruins have not yet become weathered and do not exhibit the Simmelian equipoise of nature and culture. And there are almost as many empty lots as built-up ones in many parts of the city, as can be seen from aerial photographs (Figure 24; see also Ryznar and Wagner 2001).

Empty spaces are a counterpart to the ruins. Theorists have underscored the danger of using terms like 'void', *terrain vague*, 'non-site' or 'non-place' (Augé 1995; Smithson 1996), since the people who actually live near such sites sometimes insist that the supposed wastelands are 'actually not a waste at all' but 'also an asset' (Doron 2000, 247). Perhaps a more accurate term for such empty spaces would be *negative ruins*. Like ruins, these voids represent a fusion of uncontrollable natural processes and deliberate human planning. Their form retains an echo of old cadastral surveys, assumptions about ownership and patterns of streets, sidewalks and railways imposed by city and corporate planners. As Robert Smithson noted with respect to the voids in the suburban landscape of Passaic, New Jersey, 'those holes are in a sense monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures' (Smithson 1979, 55). The effort to ward off the city's ruination through incessant demolition is thus doomed to produce ever more ruins, since it leaves behind these negative voids. With their abstract shapes, these decontextualised bits of urban infrastructure are like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle that no longer fit together.



FIGURE 27. Parking inside Detroit's Michigan Theater, December 2004. Photograph by the author.

The evolution of Detroit's downtown business district reveals a patterning of voids that reflects Judge Augustus Woodward's original 1807 hub-and-spoke pattern (Figure 25). In Figure 26, the meandering remnants of a sidewalk and the looming shell of an abandoned house reveal the encounter of natural erosion with the linearity of the planned city.

Detroit has also been largely abandoned by mass culture and consumption, both of which were central to Fordism. Tiger Stadium is crumbling and overgrown, after being replaced by a generic new ballpark that cannot serve as a vessel for collective memories from the Fordist period.²¹ In the middle of the twentieth century Detroit had a large number of downtown elegant movie palaces, and there were countless smaller theatres in the residential neighbourhoods (Morrison 1974). Now the city has only one downtown movie house, located inside the fortress-like Renaissance Center, and a first-run multiplex on 8-Mile Road, located at the city's outer edge. Inside the old Michigan Theater, built on the site of Henry Ford's earliest automobile production

workshop, cars park beneath the tatters of the stage curtains and the old projection booth (Figure 27).

Fordism has generated collective nostalgia because it was the launching pad for countless working-class people into a more middle-class existence. Many of these people experience the neoliberal, hyper-competitive present as intensely challenging and long for the days of Fordist working-class solidarity and cross-class coalitions of economic interest. Yet most recognise that the labour movement will never be as culturally and politically central as it was in Detroit during the Fordist era. Few would like to move back into the city even if it were restored to its pre-1960s condition.²²

CONCLUSION

Unlike German-Namibians, who use their ruins to cultivate a melancholic ambivalence about the finitude of their own colonial era, suburbanites viewing the urban ruins of Fordist Detroit do not seem confused about the unidirectionality of time's arrow. So why is there such fascination with ruins as opposed to the fully restored sites and historical simulacra that are usually associated with the heritage tourism industry? A distinctive feature of the ruin is that it allows the viewer to imaginatively reconstruct the missing and invisible parts (Hell forthcoming). Ruins function like Rubin's vase/profile illusion, allowing the viewer to see the intact object and its disappearance at the same time. A ruin suggests much more powerfully than a restored building the historical social formation of its genesis, a formation whose loss is simultaneously negated and avowed. Perhaps these ruins are even more evocative than fully restored buildings, which tend to present a more predictable, pre-interpreted message. The popular Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, for example, is a shrine to intense Fordist nostalgia, but as a site it is 'clean beyond reason' (Barthel 1990, 87). The heritage industry feeds on nostalgia and promotes its further development, but in doing so nostalgia is diluted, kitschified and commodified. The ruins of Detroit, existing in a seeming no-man's-land of vague property claims, decontextualised chunks of buildings that are no longer identifiable, ambiguous boundary lines and drifting populations of decommodified labour, refuse any such profit-oriented appropriation.²³

As in Detroit, the most evocative structures for German-Namibians are ruins that are left to deteriorate at their own pace or that are only partly restored. Even fully restored colonial buildings in Namibia obey a political

rather than a market logic. The ruins' intermediate location between culture and nature resonates with melancholia, which is analogously posed between life and death.

NOTES

- [1] In the regulation-theoretical literature, the term 'post-Fordism' is not just a chronological marker denoting systems that used to be Fordist but refers to a successor regime to Fordism. This new system is based on a flexible production process and information technologies, increased demand for differentiated services and niche-market products, supply-side forms of innovation, an increased role for credit and commercial capital and privatisation of the functions formerly fulfilled by the Keynesian welfare state (Jessop and Sum 2006, 76–82). Almost all of these features are missing or poorly represented in the city of Detroit. Another widely discussed characteristic of post-Fordism, the geographic relocation of production to exurbs and central business districts, also points away from seeing Detroit as a post-Fordist city, since the central business district there is partly abandoned (Figure 25) and economic growth is located almost exclusively outside the city. See Storper and Scott (1989); Hirsch (2006); and on Detroit's edge cities, Garreau (1991, ch. 4).
- [2] See also the website and publications of the late Klaus Dierks, especially <http://www.klausdierks.com/>.
- [3] The Detroit Ruins website is available at <http://detroitruins.com/maps/mapfulldetroit.htm>.
- [4] The Arcadia website is available at <http://www.arcadiapublishing.com/contact.html>.
- [5] Some public radio and television documentaries, perhaps bowing to political pressure, force themselves to adopt a more boosterish 'fall and rebirth' narrative structure. See, for example, Michigan Public Radio's documentary 'Ashes to Hope: Overcoming the Detroit Riots', broadcast on 17 July 2007 (<http://www.michiganradio.org/ashestohope.html>). This Pollyannaish approach distracts from the gravity of Detroit's crisis. However well intentioned, it inevitably reflects a quarter century of right-wing Republican domination of US politics in which poor people and poor cities were required to fend for themselves.
- [6] Detroit artist Kyong Park made a video in which images of the city's dereliction are accompanied by a voice-over by a businessman-like narrator:

Most of the buildings and houses have been burnt or demolished, and it won't take much more to 'clear cut' the rest of them. A tabula rasa has been created, so that we can take back the city dirt cheap. Using this plan, we have successfully tested new techniques of profitable land seizure, without resorting to the costly use of armed force. Hidden by countless layers of

- economic agreements and legal manipulations, we have written a new chapter of colonialism, with techniques deeply embedded in the automated global matrix of advanced capitalism. (Park 2000)
- Park's video might be read as providing a reflexive analysis of the conspiracy theory, but in a presentation at the March 2005 conference 'Ruins of Modernity' at the University of Michigan, the artist expressed his personal belief in the existence of the 50-year plan.
- [7] It is remarkable, for example, that the publisher Klaus Hess (based in Windhoek and Göttingen) offers reprints and colonial-era memoirs (e.g. Ludwig Conradt's *Erinnerungen aus zwanzigjährigem Händler- und Farmerleben in Deutsch-Südwestafrika* [originally published as a series of articles in the journal *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung* in 1905 and 1906], Wilhelm H. Laakmann's *Auf alten Spuren in Namibia. Die Erlebnisse des Frachtfahrers Richard Christel 1905–1907 und eigene Jagderinnerungen hüben wie drüben*, and Gustav Frenssen's notorious novel about the Herero and Nama wars, *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest*). Similarly, the Namibia Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft sells a reprint of Theodor Leutwein's 1907 memoirs, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*.
- [8] It is also important to recognise that the category of ex-Detroiters now included tens of thousands of African Americans who have moved to Macombe County north of Detroit or farther afield.
- [9] Stormfront is a 'white nationalist' Internet forum owned by Don Black, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan who was a member of the American Nazi Party in the 1970s; see Abel (1998) and <http://www.stormfront.org/>.
- [10] Urban theorists have also shown how modes of regulation like Fordism have a specific spatial dimension and are linked to particular territories; see Storper and Scott (1989); Brenner (1998).
- [11] Nostalgic activities such as the non-profit group currently restoring the Ford Piquette Avenue Plant in Detroit therefore tend to bridge or efface class boundaries. The official Ford Motor Company presentation of the history of the River Rouge plant, as presented to participants in the Ford Rouge Factory Tour, emphasises that while Henry Ford himself opposed the UAW, that union was eventually fully integrated into the 'great American production' of 'innovation in manufacturing' (<http://www.thehenryford.org/rouge/default.asp>). What is essential about such statements, regardless of their accuracy, is the way they tap into and nourish neo-corporatist public memories.
- [12] The one great exception to this, the Great Zimbabwe ruins, were from the moment of their rediscovery in 1871 by Carl Mauch – a German imbued with the specific German national culture of ruins – inscribed 'with meanings that confirmed old beliefs' (Shepherd 2002, 196–7) in a lost city of Africa, which in turn confirmed their singularity and led to the politicisation of the Great Zimbabwe site by post-colonial nationalists (Mauch 1969; Hall 1995, 179).
- [13] Concern for the fate of ruins also emerged later in non-European societies, as official nationalism began to call for markers of the nation's antiquity and as the needs of tourism grew (Johnson 1994). Thailand's government shifted to preserving ruins and supporting archaeological research in the second half of the nineteenth century (Peleggi 2002, 9, 13). Aztec and Mayan ruins only became objects of study, excavation and reconstruction in the nineteenth century, as Mexico emerged from colonial rule (Thomas 1999, 99, n. 5).
- [14] For example, 'Pioneer Prospectors of the Sperrgebiet', *South West Africa Annual* 4 (1948), 91; E. von Koenen, 'Zessfontein', *South West Africa Annual* 14 (1958), 71, 73.
- [15] 'Swapo refuses to condemn Mugabe gov't rights abuses', *The Namibian*, Thursday, 15 March 2007; Lindsay Dentlinger, 'Land reform to move into higher gear', *The Namibian*, 27 April 2006.
- [16] All of the forts and police stations built in Southwest Africa and in other German colonies in Africa during the 1890s had crenellated towers and walls (Schnee 1920, vol. 1, plates 13, 89; Peters 1981, 30, 56–61).
- [17] See http://www.klausdierks.com/images/Namibia_Erongo_Otjimbingwe_6.jpg.
- [18] For the Waterberg police station ruins, see <http://www.sacktrick.com/igu/germancolonialuniforms/militaria/namibia.htm>.
- [19] See <http://www.paradisevalleyblues.com/tour/hastings0370.html>. This was the heart of Detroit's black ghetto, which was demolished during the 1950s to create the expressway.
- [20] Although the 1945 plan for Detroit traffic had included rapid transit trains in depressed roadways between expressway lanes, the 1951 plan focused on expressways. Detroit, City Plan Commission (1951).
- [21] Two books that exude white suburban nostalgia for the old Tiger Stadium are by *Detroit News* (1999) and Betzold (1997). Like contemporary German-Namibians, the author of the latter book acknowledges the fissure in public memory, gesturing toward African-Americans' recollections of racial segregation in Detroit baseball.
- [22] This is not to say that the veneration of the rusting sites of working-class solidarity and labour militancy is merely contemplative. Labour tours, for example, may serve to regenerate a culture of resistance in the present. But I have found no evidence of suburban labour unionists moving back into Detroit.
- [23] Self-appointed guardians of the ruins defend them against invasion and are especially wary of the touristic suburban ruingazer. Russian photographer Boris Mikhailov and I were attacked by a posse of such guardians, who covered our parked car in garbage, while shooting pictures inside the abandoned Fisher Body 21 plant in March 2005.

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