

In late 2018, in the months between deciding to move to Berlin and moving to Berlin, I visited my childhood best friend's parents. They have family in Berlin and had a lot of recommendations for the city, one of which was the Jüdischer Friedhof Weißensee, one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in Europe. Most of those buried in the cemetery died in Berlin in the 19th and early 20th centuries, or were Jewish soldiers killed during WWI; a single stone memorial at the entrance commemorates the millions murdered in the Holocaust. During the Nazi dictatorship, the cemetery's mausoleums were sometimes used as temporary hiding places by Jews fleeing the city. After the end of WWII, the Jüdischer Friedhof Weißensee became part of East Berlin and was largely neglected, and although today it's designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the forest that grows through it, the carpeting ferns and climbing ivy, and the tombstones set askew by the sinking ground remain. It was one of the first places I went when I arrived in Berlin, and I found it both enchanting and deeply disconcerting. Standing in such a densely alive monument to the dead, I felt wholly enveloped, dislocated from the city and untethered to time. I understood, once I was there, why my friend's dad had described it to me as a "trans-dimensional thin spot."

He had just dropped the term, very casually, into our conversation, then moved on as if it needed no explanation. When pressed, he described it as a "weird, malleable boundary," an area where the temperature changes and the air suddenly feels different. I've been obsessed with the idea ever since. When I later tried to Google "trans-dimensional thin spot," the closest thing I could find was the concept of a "thin place," a term used first by the ancient pagan Celts and later by Celtic Christians to describe the awe-inspiring places "where heaven and earth collapse." It's a place, of worship or in nature, where one can sense the divine. In Web 1.0-era blogs about thin places<sup>1</sup>, people recount their experiences in Owakudani, in Hakone, or along the

Cliffs of Moher, places where "the walls between the worlds grow thin."<sup>2</sup> "There are places that exist in the world, where you are standing in two rivers at the same time," explains writer Kerri ni Dochartaigh, whose memoir, *Thin Places*, is about growing up in Derry during The Troubles and finding peace in nature. To Dochartaigh, a thin place can also be a state of mind, or a decisive moment "where you're aware you're on the cusp of somewhere or something," and you have to choose whether to turn back or proceed forward into the unknown.

A cemetery, particularly one as historically weighted as the Jüdischer Friedhof Weißensee, seems a likely venue for a thin spot or a thin place — a metaphorical threshold between life and the world beyond where, literally, a few feet of soil separate the living and the dead. But my friend's dad also gave some examples of trans-dimensional thin spots that don't fit quite as neatly within the heaven-meets-earth category. One was a place he used to take us to look for river glass when we were kids, a rocky bank where one river forks into two. Another was the park where we played soccer, which juts up against the same river, giving it the name River's Edge. With these examples, a trans-dimensional thin spot could be understood to be similar to an "ecotone," an ecology term that describes the area where one ecosystem overlaps with another. Ecotones occur as part of the "edge effect," or the transition from one ecosystem to the next, like where forest becomes grassland, or a field meets a river. The transition may happen gradually or abruptly, with an ecotone that's wide or slender, but because it lies in the in-between — neither either or, but *both* — an ecotone is usually abundant with resources and thus rich in biodiversity. In the context of permaculture, gardeners can take advantage of these ecotones, where water, warmth, nutrients, and symbiotic species gather. "Conditions such as air temperature, humidity, soil moisture, and light intensity levels all change at edges."<sup>3</sup>

1 <http://www.thinplace.net/2008/05/what-is-thin-place.html>

2 <https://ask.metafilter.com/233327/The-places-in-the-world-where-the-walls-are-weak>

3 Defining the Edge in Simple Terms / Jonathon Engels. IN: Permaculture Research Institute, August 31, 2016. <https://www.permaculturenews.org/2016/08/31/defining-edge-simple-terms/>

It's not only on the edges of ecosystems that these abundant zones are created. Ecotones can also arise simply at the edges of a boulder, for instance, which offers the warmth, shelter, and nutrients for many living things to thrive. In a book called *Gathering Moss*, botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer explains why moss grows on the sides of trees or the tops of boulders, keeping flush with the warm surfaces where sunlight lingers for longer. Lying low, moss gathers the moisture it needs to grow thick and plush, but it never grows high. Instead, it stays within a slim "boundary layer" between the surface below it and the moving air above it. In this placid zone between wind and land, where "the earth and atmosphere first make contact,"<sup>4</sup> moss inhabits a microclimate only a few centimeters tall but wide enough to blanket an entire forest. A very thin spot.

If an ecotone demarcates a horizontal shift, from one ecosystem to the next, and a boundary layer exists within a vertical shift, from atmosphere to earth, then maybe a "thin place" marks a spiritual transition, and a "thin spot" an energetic one. While reading Kirsty Bell's *The Undercurrents*, I came across the term "morphic fields," coined by Rupert Sheldrake, a Cambridge- and Harvard-educated biologist, who, mid-career, shifted his field of research to paranormal phenomena. Sheldrake describes morphic fields as the means by which memories can be shared by people who don't live in the same place or even the same time period. Bell relates the idea of morphic fields to the strange energy of her apartment building in Berlin, which she believes is holding on to something from the past that needs to be acknowledged and understood in order to be released. The book traces her investigation into the history of her house, which soon widens into an investigation of the history of her neighborhood — an area "full of hesitant gaps, temporal jumps, and wild moments of greenery" — and finally into the history of the city. For Bell, Berlin's "atmospheric inklings" and abrupt shifts are the results of its troubled and sedimented history, which permeates the city in ways that are invisible but felt. On a more physical level, Bell also shows how the awkward angles and weird gaps in the city's urban landscape are the result of several truncated or oblite-

rated city plans that lay over each other like a palimpsest. Not to mention that Berlin is built on a swamp: "You cannot see it, so you don't often think about it, but sometimes you catch a whiff of subterranean swamp in the air. Smells that hint at the presence of hidden things. Things that belong to secret realms."<sup>5</sup>

Nearly a year after I moved to Berlin and first visited the cemetery at Weißensee, I went on a day-long group walk led by my friend Ian Warner through the south of the city. Ian called it the "meltwater walk" because we were letting Berlin's ancient topography guide us through the present-day city. Berlin is sited on a glacial valley, "carved out in the last Ice Age when outflowing meltwaters, trailing sand and gravel, left behind them a pockmarked landscape of lakes and water channels," per Bell.<sup>6</sup> As Ian explained, the Teltow plateau in the south was riddled with smaller "kettle holes" formed by the melting of landborne icebergs, which became ponds and small lakes. Our walk followed a string of kettle holes, some still remaining, some merely memories, having long been swallowed up by the Teltow canal or filled in for land development. For finding the disappeared ones, we relied on three maps, from 1802, 1851, and 1886, which depicted pre-industrialized Berlin with delicate shading and expressionistic lines. Together these maps guided our walk through the same but very different city a couple centuries later, creating what Ian called a "mythic landscape."

I found a couple of trans-dimensional thin spots on that walk, following the topography of another time. Berlin feels like a city particularly suited for them, a place with an ever-present past and an identity that has changed completely several times over. A "strange, incomplete city," per historian Alexandra Richie,<sup>7</sup> a metropolis continuously unfinished. But a trans-dimensional thin spot might be found anywhere; it probably has more to do with the person than the place. I collect them now,<sup>8</sup> these zones where time and distance overlap and the boundaries at the edges of our worlds break. Together, they map out a kind of personal mythic geography of places recognized only by feeling, never by sight.

4 *Gathering Moss* / Robin Wall Kimmerer. - Corvallis : Oregon State University, 2003.

5 *The Undercurrents* / Kirsty Bell. - New York : Other Press, 2022.

6 *The Undercurrents* / Kirsty Bell. - New York : Other Press, 2022.

7 *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin* / Alexandra Richie. - New York : Carroll & Graf, 1998.

8 <https://www.are.na/meg-miller/trans-dimensional-thin-spots>