



Cracking the Paris Carrières: Corporal Terror and Illicit Encounter Under the City of Light

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'What heresy! To show such zeal over these rotten scraps...'

- Jean Paul Sartre, 1952²

I began my fieldwork earlier than expected due to the spontaneity necessary to conduct ethnographic research. I was invited by groups of urban explorers to undertake unique adventures into some of the most outrageous, beautiful and generally unseen places in the United Kingdom and Continental Europe. I have spent the past two years in massive storm drains and tendrilling sewer networks, on top of cranes and construction scaffolding, in derelict mental asylums and decaying Soviet military bases. My research has passed through 200 sites in seven countries with over 80 different people from a wide range of backgrounds, all sharing a desire for eccentric escapades. As a result, I have collected over 12,000 photographs of peeling wallpaper, spider-webbed glass panes, mouldering, broken



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² This quote, as well as the others cited in this story, can be found in a reprinted edition of Jean-Paul Sartre's essay 'A Fine Display of Capuchins' in the August 2009 issue of Harpers Magazine, pp. 22-25.

doorframes, silkily lit corridors, softly glistening sewer brick, glowing urban skylines and dark infrastructural tunnel networks. My 10 terabytes of hard drive

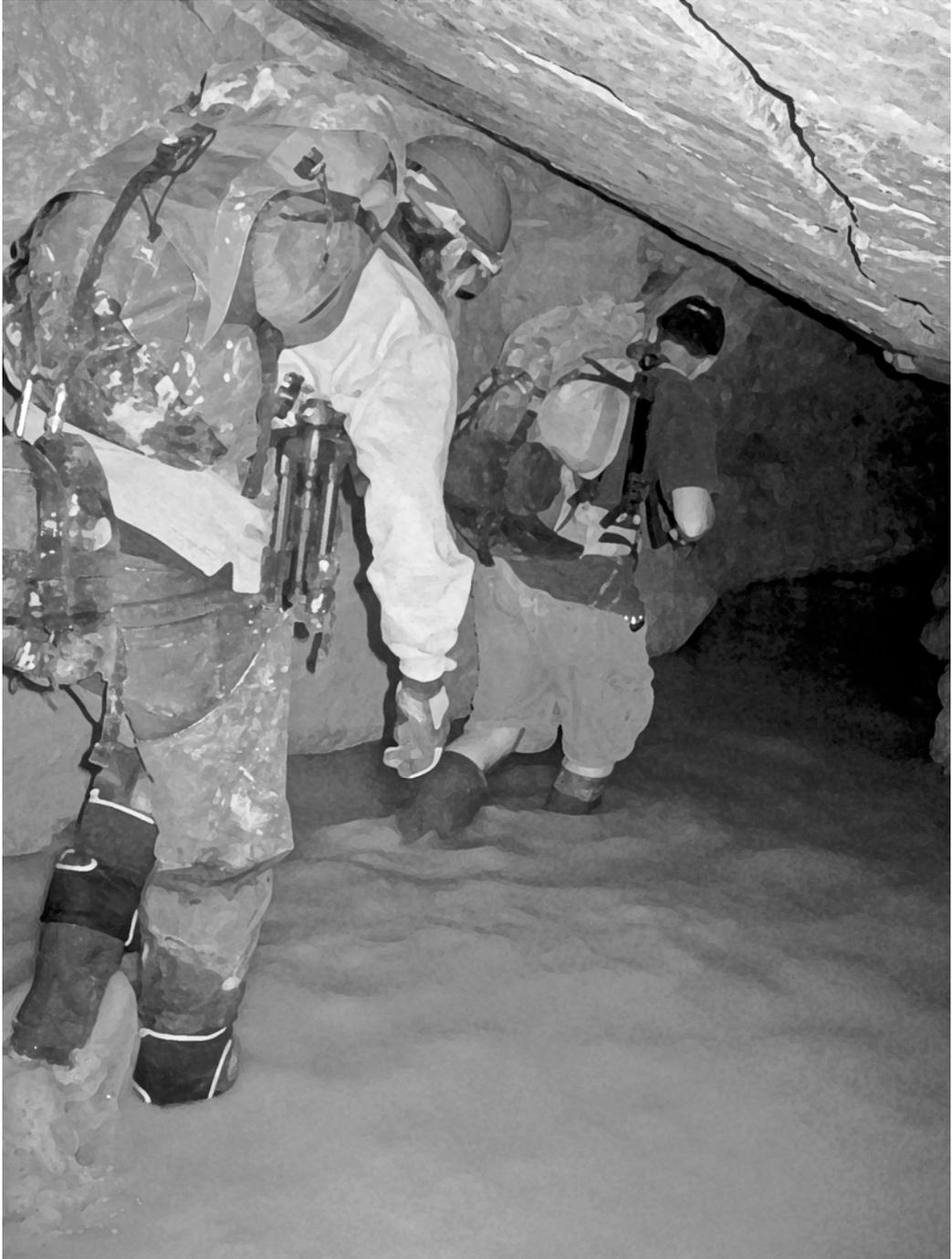


Figure 1: Zeal, photo by Author

space sitting next to my computer also contains over 50 hours of video footage of whispered conversations, soft steps on rusty metal footbridges and dimly lit grainy

images of people ‘light painting’ dark rooms with multi-coloured camera flashes and trusty Tesco torches.

I now live in self-imposed exile, trying to write up these misadventures, and despair has begun to set in as I pore over photos from our various geographic escapades. Is this what people call post-fieldwork depression? What do I miss more – the adrenaline rush of exploration or the friends I have made along the way? As I flip through digital folders, I see that so many of our adventures are rather flatly captured in this digital image collection. The photos sit, colourfully latent and limp, challenging my goal to ‘interpret’ them. Is it possible to relay the affectual qualities of the experiences these images represent through text? Only time will tell.

Of all these emotionally charged memories, one archive really haunts me. I am almost afraid to open it. This folder contains 300 photographs from three days in the Paris Catacombs, my first international expedition, the first time I slept underground, the first time I walked on the bones of the dead (See Figure 1). To be clear, these were not photos of the tourist catacombs that interested publics can visit. These are the ‘other’ catacombs, the cavernous quarries populated by *cataphiles*, *cataflics* and subterranean landscape artists.

Cataphiles are the odd breed of urban explorer who spend much of their time illegally roaming (and building) the ancient quarry network that we call ‘the catacombs’ or ‘the ktas’ as shorthand. Technically, these quarries are called *carrières de Paris* and there is a special unit of the French Police, appropriately called *cataflics*, whose primary interest is to stop people from going there.

Motivated by the necessity of confronting these memories for my write-up, I finally open the folder and begin reminiscing on the fantastic expansion of my geographical conceptions that took place in those old tombs; thinking back to this early research when it dawned on me (despite my background in archaeology) that the verticality of living cities extends downward as well as upward. Now, as I walk city streets all over the world, I imagine decaying snaking corridors of sewers, utility tunnels and forgotten places beneath my feet, long stretches of alternative realities that constellate the underground and populate the imaginations of those who dare to venture past normative city space. Clearly, my spatial consciousness was eternally expanded on this mission that almost ended in a jail cell. It began like this.

The day before I left for France, I laid out my equipment on the floor of my London flat. Backpack, swimming trunks, 3 torches (one a headlight with infrared capability), caving helmet, hip-high fishing waders, sleeping bag, video camera, still camera, tripod, passport, flip-flops. *Yes*, I said to myself with hands on hips, surveying the gear that would take me 100 feet underneath Paris, *now I’m ready*.

The next night I was on a coach from London’s Victoria Station at 7 p.m. with Hydra, one of my London project participants, on an epic 8-hour overnight haul which involved attempting to sleep sitting up, being shuffled off of the coach

in Dover for a mild interrogation by French border patrol and crossing the English Channel on a car ferry with arguing Haitian families and a large party of stoic druids on similarly tight budgets.³ We arrived in Paris at 7 a.m., tired, disoriented and in no way prepared for Marc Explo, our Parisian guide, who was imbued with unstoppable enthusiasm that caused him to near-run almost everywhere. Marc met us on the street, conjuring himself out of thin air like an illusionist, asking us if we had eaten breakfast. With creaky voices and bags under our eyes, we muttered that our poor French scored us only an espresso each at an early bird cafe near the *Porte d'Orléans* metro stop, hardly qualifying as a meal.

So after a few croissants, a banana or two, some more coffee, and a grocery trip made with the intention of stuffing three days worth of food and water into our backpacks, we were off, a crew of three international hobo ninjas, prepared to sneak into the underworld.

Into Paris proper we walked, past highway overpasses and old railroad tracks, into a dark alley frequented by graffiti artists and underage kids drinking cheap wine, into a hole in the wall with a four foot drop behind it, and *voilà*, we crossed the liminal zone of the 'known' city into a realm of illicit encounter, raw experience, playful exuberance and corporal terror.

The first thing that becomes evident once you have entered these subsurface quarries is the toll it begins exacting on your body almost immediately. This is partly to do with the fact that the gallery ceilings are rarely high enough to stand in, forcing one to squat-walk⁴ the whole way, partly due to the uneven surfaces of the ceiling which are constantly knocking your hard hat, exacting vulgar exclamations and producing sore necks, partly due to the stale air in particular places that has you sucking oxygen like you are on a respirator, and partly due to an unquenchable sense of claustrophobia. Here I necessarily mean to imply that even if you are not claustrophobic, a *sense* of claustrophobia is understood by everyone as you wiggle through *chatières*⁵ (See Figure 2) under cracked ceilings anticipating the inevitable suffocation in densely packed earth that would take place if one of those fissures you are staring two inches from your nose gave way. Sometimes I would stop and lay there, exhausted, wondering how many people had the same vision in that same place. Not many I suppose.

³ I proposed to Hydra that the Haitians were on their way to visit family in Paris and found the cheapest tickets to Europe would arrive at London Heathrow, hence their presence on the coach. The druids however, who drank heavily, stout foam hanging from beards, I could only surmise were attending some sort of continental druid congress. Whatever their reasons for being on the overnight ferry, the presence of both groups was appreciated for the conversation and levity they brought to the journey.

⁴ Later dubbed the 'catawalk' by Marc.

⁵ Tiny crawl spaces – literally: cat holes.



Figure 2: Catacraw, photo by Author

In 1952, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about his visit to the official catacombs in Rome where he saw numerous dead Capuchins (Catholic Monks) displayed in contorted positions on the walls. This experience seemed to have left Sartre mildly traumatized as he observed two French visitors who were ‘torn between admiration and terror’ and identified with them. He noted to himself at some point on his tour that it couldn’t possibly be Christian to ‘play jigsaw puzzles with an ossuary. Desecration of graves, sadism, necrophilia – this is all blatant sacrilege’.

Perhaps Sartre’s terror stemmed from a long Western history that has worked to instil in us a fear of the subterranean. The underground has been inalterably connected to the dead, the dark, the mysterious, the unknown, the criminal and the evil; the realm of Satan, Hades and the River Styx. Then again, maybe this isn’t just a Western notion, perhaps it’s more primal, part of our fight or flight instincts where there is nothing to fight – the only option left is to flee in terror. I was reminded of being in the Yucatan peninsula years earlier, standing next to a Maya field worker on the edge of a limestone sinkhole filled with dark water. I told him I wanted to jump in and he said, ‘That’s an entrance to *Xibabla*, the place of fear ... if you jump in there, you will never return.’ It goes without saying that, like Sartre, I was memorised by the sacrilege and jumped.

Two days after entering the hole in the wall and climbing under the City of Light, I was lying in a pile of human bones. As a reformed archaeologist, I could think of few things more horrendous or disrespectful than lying in a pile of bones

pushed into an underground city by ambitious chain-smoking bulldozer operators clearing the way for modernity. It's disturbing yes, using disarticulated skeletons as a background for photographs, but how could I negotiate the boundaries of terror, find whether they are a product of social and cultural constraints, naïve historical precedent, simple religious sentimentality, or something more primally visceral, unless I myself confronted my most sacred beliefs? And so I took up the challenge and stretched myself over a pile of skeletal material, my mind silenced by the surreal horror of the moment.

We spent three days in the catacombs, though we could only cope with sleeping down there one night due to the cold that starts seeping upwards through the stone at about 3 a.m., immobilising your body like a chilled corpse in the morgue, rigor mortis long set in. We walked in that perpetual primate crouch, glad for the small breaks when we got to pull ourselves over the mud on our bellies through cramped galleries, with sore muscles and sleep-addled brains, sometimes encountering other trespassers, leaving a trail of votive candles in rooms we had briefly inhabited, wrapped in the ghosts of hundreds of years of history. Reality seemed to take on the form of a dream, though whether this was due to exhaustion, intoxication, jubilation, or all of the above, I really cannot say. I kept thinking that Burke was there, hands in the air, crying out that it was all so 'sublime', Dante Alighieri dancing around in the background with some skull he found (See Figure 3).



Figure 3: Exhausted, photo by Author

And while this state of being was itself a delicious confusion, what was and is clear as I look back at the photos, are the bonds we built on the journey together, the tangible tendrils of human relationships that come only with shared experience of a certain unique flavour. The ethnographic boundaries between research, friendship and play were as slippery as my grasp on reality at the time. I feel myself, still, unsure what was personal and what was professional on that trip, inclined to horde these experiences, this probably being the reason why I was afraid to open the folder of images to begin writing in the first place.

At the end of our three days in the Paris Catacombs, perhaps due to the delirious excitement that was amassed over the course of the expedition, we thought it would be a grand idea to exit via a manhole cover in central Paris at 4 a.m. After some cartographic negotiation involving deciphering hand written notes about newly welded manhole exits, we found the cover we were looking for, realizing with some trepidation that it was up a 30 meter ladder. While Hydra guarded our packs, Marc and I climbed slowly and carefully to the top of the ladder and began taking turns pushing up the round iron plate which seemed to have a newly welded bar underneath necessitating superhuman strength to lift it from the inside. After a few minutes of concerted effort, I panicked, and began pushing with all my strength, back against the cover, balancing on the wet steel ladder in the darkness, the trembling beam from my headtorch shaking against the wall. Shoulder blades jammed firmly against the cover, it tilted slightly but remained wedged like a cookie too large to fit in a cup of tea. Traces of light fluttered in from the quiet street above and I could see pavement, I felt hopeful. Then a car drove by. No it was a van. A white van. And it stopped. And then reversed. *Merde.*

Seconds later, torches were beaming through the open crack in the manhole, voices yelling unintelligible commands and inquiries in French, fielded by an exhausted Marc below me on the ladder who assured them we were not terrorists and yes, we needed help getting out. It took four police to open the manhole cover. I emerged first, being at the top of the ladder, and was sat in the police van I had seen from our subterranean prison, too tired and overjoyed to breath fresh, open air to care that I was in police custody. A female officer, assigned to guard me I guess, looked me up and down and only now did I realize that I was still wearing hip waders, my headtorch still shining, wrapped around a greasy mop of hair that had not been washed in 3 days, smelling of whiskey and sweat and coated in quarry mud from head to toe. I could tell that her first instinct was to assume I was homeless or a vagrant living beneath the city, but the obviously expensive video camera setup strapped around my neck was confusing the issue. Was her next guess that I was a geographer doing fieldwork? Not likely I suppose.

As Marc's hand emerged from the manhole cover holding my backpack, I ran over to grab it from him and help him out. The police didn't stop me. It occurred to me at this moment that perhaps I was dealing with a different sort of law enforcement than I was used to in London, or that maybe, just maybe, they couldn't actually detain us given they had no idea what we were doing down there.

With Marc and Hydra now standing in the street, Marc began to strip himself of his waders and rub his hands with sanitizer. Conversations, negotiations and explanations ensued. We made clear that we were simply down there taking photographs. The police call the bluff, asking to see them, and we obliged. Slowly, with every soft click of the camera button that reveals our endeavours, their incredulousness turned to adulation. Apparently unaware that there was 180-mile quarry system under the city he patrols every night, one of the officers exclaimed, ‘I want to see this!’ and went for the ladder. The other officers stopped him, reminding him that he is on duty. *Yes, I thought to myself, I am definitely dealing with a different sort of law enforcement here.*

Whether due to the relaxed nature of the French police or Marc’s silver tongue, we ended up eating apples and chatting with the cops for an hour or so under some sort of informal detainment as they waited for a company to come close the manhole we had emerged from (insurance liability etc., etc.) (See Figure 4). In the end, they gave us directions home with waved goodbyes and we trotted off at 5 a.m. in our flip-flops to catch the first train back to the *Porte d’Orléans* metro station.



Figure 4: Detained, photo by Hydra

Since this journey, Marc and I have undertaken countless trespasses together, climbing Europe’s tallest buildings in the early hours of the morning, wandering around in London’s sewers and cracking the Paris carrières time and time again.

Hydra and I, watching Bonfire Night fireworks from a chimney of Battersea Power Station in London after sneaking past the security patrol, laughed about how little we knew during those first days in Paris.

The line between ethnography and life is necessarily thin. I can honestly say that I have learned more through experiences such as these than I have gleaned from any book, lecture or seminar. The notion of anything being post-fieldwork, when you do ethnography, seems an absurdity to me after looking through these photos. Long after this 'project' is done, the imaginative moments, new points of reference, memories of challenges met, perceptions reconfigured and friendships built will remain, regardless of my 'research outcomes'. I am now, and always will be, an urban explorer.

Acknowledgments

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