

What is Recovered

Martine Hawkes

Saidin Salkić is a survivor of Bosnia's 1995 Srebrenica genocide. Salkić was interviewed on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Radio National in July 2007. The interviewer asked Salkić to tell him about the genocide: "What can you remember about that?" (ABC Radio National). Salkić cited memories of the smell of his father's jumper and of the flowers growing in his mother's garden. The interviewer interrupted him, asking for a more chronological description of the events of the genocide itself. Salkić responded that it was not possible to answer the question in such a concise, easily archivable manner, that "you can't really bundle your memories like that" (ABC Radio National).

Listening to this interview, I sat waiting for a neat 'survivor sound-bite' that I could neatly insert into this paper. It didn't happen.

I turned off the radio thinking that I had learned nothing of the genocide that took place in Srebrenica. In listening to a survivor—an eye witness—there is a sense that he, of all people, should be able to tell the chronology, the facts of the event; of who did what to whom and why. Yet what is learned—what Salkić's testimony-without-testimony spoke of and explained—is the most important thing: loss. This is the lacuna in testimony. What happens to the loss when we attempt to testify to it? What is then lost? Salkić's memory is unarchivable in the normative sense, and his refusal to testify in the accepted way ruptures the process (not a necessarily deliberate refusal, but a refusal borne out of an inability and an impossibility of containing such an event through language). Loss eludes testimony and is also loss as the loss of testimony. It is impossible to fully testify to loss, and that is testimonial, or testimony's trace.

Using Derrida's theories around the archive and the cinder, this article examines what survives an event such as genocide, what is left and, crucially, what is missing, what is not recoverable. What happens to the loss when we attempt to testify to it, to salvage something of it? What is disrupted? What is instead recovered in its place?

Derrida's archive (Derrida, *Archive Fever*), responds to these gaps and losses. This archive is not, it would seem, about the archive at all. Instead, Derrida provides a departure from the examination of the structure and institution of the archive. As Carolyn Steedman puts it in her reading of *Archive Fever*, "it turned out not to be about the archival turn. It is about dust." (Steedman ix) This "dust", this prelude to the ash, to the cinder, is the search for what is not there, for what is barely visible but at the same time, viscous and residual; the dust which coats and conceals no matter how well you have wielded the duster. For Derrida the dust he has found in the archive is both a meditation on beginnings and on the "fever". He reflects not on the archive, then, but on that which drives (and destroys) the archive.

Derrida's description of prayer is a way of approaching an understanding of how a memory such as Salkić's—at once unarchivable, yet crucial to our comprehension of the event, might fit into an understanding of the archive. Derrida writes, "My way of praying, if I pray, is absolutely secret. Even if [I were] in a synagogue praying with others, I know that my own prayer would be silent and secret, and interrupting something in the community" (On Religion). Is it impossible to archive memories such as Salkić's because his is an impenetrable recollection that disrupts the broader archive? Why do we desire that the archive archives? Why do we desire that the archive recovers, documents and makes public these excruciatingly private moments? The ultimate secret, private and silent moment of death is made loud and public in the archives of genocide. The tendency is to want archives to show the individual, the human being amongst the tangle of anonymous bodies with whom

we can identify. But in laying their death and their life bare (indeed in laying their death and life bare through the act of showing their death and life), their privacy and secret is disclosed. Their final privacy in a public death. This is death that is made public through its interconnectedness to the other simultaneous deaths around it. This is also a death that, through its place in a broader history, becomes disconnected from the individual. Finally, it is also a death that has come about through the choice made by someone else that this is your moment and mode of death.

I wish to look again at Derrida when he writes that his prayer, though silent and secret, is “interrupting something in the community” (*On Religion*). Salkić’s memory, too, interrupts. It causes a rupture in what an archive is perceived to be and remains unarchivable. It interrupts our process, yet it cannot be disregarded. Salkić’s memory of his parents is at first seemingly of minor importance in establishing an historical truth as to what occurred in Srebrenica, yet what he has remembered is the loss, the impossibility of remembering, of salvaging this event intact for another audience.

If Salkić had presented a readily archivable memory of Srebrenica—a logical and coherent sound bite—would it have a place in the archive? Is such a memory recoverable? Would it be a memory and experience hidden by the formulaic style of historical memory? As it is, Salkić’s memory ruptures the archive. It reveals those dusty spots of the event that our duster cannot reach. It is this dust that removes our certainty, our hope in the archive as a provider of answers and as a clean receptacle for the truth (this whole truth).

“Suspension of certainty is part of the prayer” (Derrida, *On Religion*). We must suspend our certainty in the archive and it is this uncertainty that drives us to keep looking, to keep asking, to keep collecting. To know that we cannot know. To know that we can never have a complete archive. Derrida speaks of the “hopelessness of prayer” (*On Religion*). The hopelessness of the archive lies in its inability to ever provide a complete or conclusive story and it is this hopelessness that is also driving the archive. I think that the archive should contain these dusty spots that reveal rather than conceal.

Still we, the archivists of other people’s memories, fear inconclusivity and complication in the archive. We do not wish to suspend our certainty. Still we assume that through an archive we can fully hold an event. The interviewer will always interrupt Salkić’s memory, demanding the full account, the complete archive, as though such a thing were possible. Still our archive privileges and still then, our archive is hopeless. Other genocides are ignored even as they occur, filed still further back, yet the dust is not going anywhere. Even when it fully coats and conceals an event, the dust lends the event and its memories form and marks their non/presence.

Maybe, then, the archive in its presumed weight is no more than a skin, “the glosses on the edge of the abyss” (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 143), giving a thin layer of protection and concealment. It is the losses and exclusions (those scarred and phantom limbs) that urge us to look further. To know, then, the archive as Foucault’s “unstable assemblage of faults, fissures and heterogeneous layers” (146). So what, then? How do we reconcile ourselves with or even begin our recovery of the scarred and phantom limbs? (Do they even want to be found? Are they even there?) This is Derrida’s dilemma of “How to watch over something that one can, however, neither watch over, nor assimilate, nor internalise, nor categorise” (*For What Tomorrow...A Dialogue* 138).

Yet these testimonies (such as Salkić’s) are disallowed. They rupture with their silence. The archive cannot contain such testimony. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why testimony cannot be codified. The silence, after all, cannot in itself offer any hint or clue towards a complete testimony. The silence cannot provide an archiving system into which Salkić’s memory might be deposited or neatly filed. Instead the silent cinder marks an

acknowledgment of the difficulty of representation and of defining an experience by way of collectivity or of representing trauma in a coherent survivor sound-bite.

These are the Derridean cinders of the event. The cinders are not the event—the originary sound or moment—itsself. They are the ashes of this. To try and contain, conclude and comprehend the event itself through its ashes—through the bare artefacts it leaves behind—is to try to comprehend something that is ungraspable and unknowable. Derrida writes, “The cinder is not, is not what is. It remains from what is not, in order to recall the delicate, charred bottom of itself only non-being or non-presence” (Derrida, *Cinders* 39). Yet he continues, “Cinders remain. Cinder there is.”

This is the fragility of the cinder, smothering and concealing the secret before it reaches us, translating it from language into unreadable ash. Was it ever really with us or on its way to meet us? This is “not some sort of conditional secret that could be revealed, but the secret that there is no secret, that there never was one, not even one” (Caputo 109). Turning to Salkić’s memories, I wonder if there is anything there other than an amnesiac or uncooperative guest/ghost? Maybe I wrote his words down incorrectly in my initial dismissal? Or maybe the memories are, in their incompleteness, in the interrupted gaps, telling us a secret? That there is none. That it is ineffable, not some secret waiting to be whispered, intact, in our ear. That nothing is fully recoverable from such an event and that it is the very unrecoverability that tells all that is important to know of the event.

The fire has burned and consumed its beginnings and its event, leaving only ash, cinder, behind as a trace. As it is a cindered trace, it differs from other traces in its unchartability. It is not possible to follow the flyaway cinders back to an event as the cinders are not markers, but remains: “the body of which cinders is the trace has totally disappeared, it has totally lost its contours, its form, its colours, its natural determination” (Derrida, *Points* 391). In genocide, people have been killed, raped, disappeared, removed, displaced. The cinders that remain are unidentifiable and undetermined, but it is this presence of non-presence that remains. This is the invisible presence of the loss. Unlike a footprint, the cinder cannot be followed, cannot be recovered. It is a trace which “remains without remaining, which is neither present nor absent, which destroys itself, which is totally consumed, which is a remainder without remainder. That is, something which is not” (Derrida, *Points* 208).

So what light can Derrida’s dusty cinder possibly shed on the archival responses to genocide? In its marking and coating of the various impossibilities and losses within the archive, the cinder makes certain aspects more visible. If not visible, then perhaps sensed as one senses smoke. Let us consider the romantic imagining of a library and the role that dust plays in such an imagining. The dust swirls around, leaving shiny absences while also settling heavily on certain shelves. This is a revealing dust, a dust which marks time, marking the losses and forgettings, rendering the absences and difficulties within the archive not so much wholly visible, as visible through their invisibility.

This is the invisible smoke that fogs the glass and sneaks under the velvet rope. We invoke the call to never again (“and again, and again, and again” echoes Homi K Bhabha), we mark remembrance days, we watch trials from behind the glass in polite institutionalised silence, we remember only the dead and the time, we build memorials and establish courts, we write dissertations and publish our articles, we cram the impossible nothing – what we imagine to be empty space – full of language and debate. But what do these lives and losses mean? What depth and weight is in the emptiness, the silence, the secret? Cinders persist. Cinders mark the lacuna and the space for the silence and silenced. The cinder, the burned remains of language, provides no way of telling or testifying.

The cinders, in marking the difficulty of representation, also mark the exclusion and loss of certain voices within the archive. To see the cinder as a provision of a lens through which to view absences is a fragile vision. Yet, within the cinder is an impression of a figure (the hints

and remains of a burned moment; that which was but no longer is). In the cinder's very presence, in its non-presence, this entails and implies an absence. The event "immediately incinerates itself, in front of your eyes: an impossible mission" (Derrida, *Cinders* 35). This impossible mission, though, contains a possibility in the gap, the space that is left. There is no longer the physical support of the form; we are left with a grey shapeless ash, as "everything is annihilated in the cinders" (Derrida, *Points* 391). While the event has totally lost the trace of itself in its incineration, what rises (dare I say phoenix-like) from the ash is the choking shapelessness of a loss. A loss that defies and confounds the archive.

Yet how can the cinder, the ash marking the gaps, the silence, the ghostly secret, be incorporated into testimony and the testimonial gathering modes? Can such testimonies be codified? Agamben's thoughts, through 'Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive' are crucial in this respect in contemplating the im/possibility of gaining a complete testimony and of the necessity of the lacuna in all testimony. Agamben writes of the absence of the complete witness to the event through analogy: "Just as in the expanding universe, the furthest galaxies move away from us at a speed greater than that of their light, which cannot reach us, such that the darkness we see in the sky is nothing but the invisibility of the light of unknown stars, so that the complete witness [...] is the one we cannot see." (161 – 162). It is precisely the one who cannot testify, who is silent and silenced, who is the complete witness. And it precisely because of this that the incorporation of the cinder—the act of pinning down the ash—is perhaps impossible to approach within the archive.

I borrow here Primo Levi's example cited by Agamben. Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz amongst other things, writes of a child in Auschwitz called Hurbinek who repeats the word *mass-klo* or perhaps *matisklo* to himself, but the meaning of the word remains secret. Levi writes of the child that, "nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine" (38). The word becomes the cinders of the lacuna represented in Levi's archive—in his testimony. Agamben writes that, "this means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness" (39).

In order to give this sound to the event—to see its shadow and hear its silence, we must remove our reliance on the "sun"—on having the remembering done for us through didactic monuments and museums. This brings to mind, in this impossible incorporation, the designated "Void Space" at the Jüdisches Museum in Berlin. The Jüdisches Museum in Berlin is something of a perfect archive. The "Void Space" is where the missing elements might be felt. Standing in the void, I felt something of the loss and the claustrophobia that is only possible in a large, dark, empty space shut in by a heavy handle-less door. However, if I had walked through the door and into this void without knowing what it was, I would most likely have backed out, thinking that I had made a mistake; that this space wasn't part of the museum. Instead, it is a designated void. It is an incredibly effective and affective space, but it is still an ordered, designated, planned space. I can almost hear the planning meeting: "over here in the South Wing, that's where we'll put the loss." Here, the cinder element, that missing part, is given space. Yet, in its provision here in this museum space, the ash is cooled. In its designation as such a space—its permanence and uniformity—something of the cinder is extinguished and its fragility is lost: "if you entrust it to paper, it is all the better to inflame you with" (Derrida, *Cinders* 53).

The cinder should instead reconfigure the very structures of our responses; the way we consider the structure of the archive itself. The cinder marks the impossibility. It must be external to the current representation. It cannot be incorporated. Nothing can be built from the cinder; no Phoenix can rise from it, nothing recognisable in it or from it. To sanction it and offer it "space" would remove its purpose, strip it of its ashes, it "remains unpronounceable in order to make saying possible although it is nothing" (Derrida, *Cinders* 73).

However, in these cinders and their draughts, we are left with crucial refutations. There is a something here that defies the archive, which defies the reductions and exclusions, which defies those attempts to “burn everything” (holos caustos), to destroy all through the act of genocide itself. This is a haunting. In the cinderless archive, in the interrupting and limiting of Salkić’s testimony, we “have gone so fast as to be unaware of its existence” (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 194). We rush to conclude, comprehend and contain, and in our rush, we miss the patient cinder and we do not feel its haunting. However, should we show our own patience (the patience of a cinder), we would find the (necessarily) unending task of comprehending genocide, and find there something “troubling enough to become unforgettable to the point of obsession” (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 194).

This is the hope in and for the archive as a means of wrestling with the crises of response presented by genocide, and brings my call for openness and dialogue with and of the archive. The cinder recovered from the event, rather than being a philosophical whimsy, marks that which has been lost or silenced or forgotten through the archive in its current structure. The archive as it stands has become, to borrow Zournazi’s thoughts on hope, “self enclosed and the exchange becomes a kind of monologue, a type of depression and narcissism where territories are defended and the stakes raised are already known” (Zournazi 12). Cinders are the hope in the archive. They are also a dangerous, gamblers hope in which the outcomes remain unknown. They are that which has been burned, which can no longer exist in (or bear any resemblance to) the original form, but which persist nonetheless, disrupting the known entities of the archive with dust, the promise of a secret.

A secret which can never be told, but that is hope. This is a hope which, as the unearthed remains of a skeleton described by Linda Marie Walker, haunts, just as a cinder might: “The remains, in their haunting, were giving, or opening, a space for thought and a dreaming of past presence.” Hope caught in a cinder, made airborne. Hope that is recovered intact from the event. Hope that these spaces and gaps in the archive, marked by the cinder, might not descend into either a hopeless disengagement nor a retreat into useless and futile rage in the face of genocide and its informing debates. Hope instead that the archive might be turned from a monologue of certainty into an engagement, an exchange, a constant uncertain questioning. A sense that there is no cool remove from genocide and that to attempt to contain it is to do damage to the memory.

I end with a quote from Primo Levi in his short story on the element of carbon, which comes at the end of *The Periodic Table*. This atom of carbon that Levi attempts to describe, and of which “every verbal description must be inadequate” (227), is also the cinder. It is invisible to the eye, it is unpronounceable, but it coats everything. And without its presence we are and we have recovered nothing: “So it happens that every element says something to someone (something different to each) like the mountain valleys or beaches visited in youth. One must perhaps make an exception for carbon, because it says everything to everyone” (Levi 225).

The dependence on and domination of archives which have at their core an aim of concluding, comprehending and containing an event, denies the necessary complexity and incomprehensibility of stories such as Salkić’s. There is a risk here of forgetting that such complex stories, such incomplete memories—like carbon itself—speak to the essence of what it is to be human and what it is to have lost.

References

ABC Radio National. “Kasedevah Blues.” *Life Matters*. 26 July 2007.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Keynote Speech: On Global Memory, Reflections on Barbaric Traditions." Reimagining Asia Conference and Exhibition, *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*: Berlin, 14 March 2008.

Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Press, 1997.

Derrida, Jacques and Elisabeth Roudinesco. *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004.

———. *On Religion*. Toronto: Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, 2002.

———. *The Politics of Friendship*. London, New York: Verso, 1997.

———. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

———. *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995.

———. *Cinders*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Ed. D. F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Levi, Primo. *The Periodic Table*. London: Abacus Books, 1986.

Walker, Linda Marie. "The Archaeology of Surfaces, or What Is Left Moment to Moment, or I Can't Get over It." *An Archaeology of Surface(s)*. (2003). 20 Dec. 2007 <<http://ensemble.va.com.au/lmw/surface/surfacenotes.html>>.

Zournazi, Mary. *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. Australia: Pluto Press, 2002.

Hawkes, Martine. "What is Recovered." *M/C Journal* 11.6 (Dec. 2008). 27 Mar. 2009 <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/92>>.

Martine Hawkes

Martine Hawkes is a PhD student at the University of South Australia within the School of Communication, Information and New Media. Her research involves the study of archives around genocide. She has worked extensively in the refugee and humanitarian sector in Australia and Europe.

Copyright © M/C, 1998-2008
ISSN 1441-2616

M/C — Media and Culture was founded in 1998 as a place of public intellectualism, analysing and critiquing the meeting of media and culture. Our publications and other activities serve as a point of crossover between the popular and the academic — we take seriously the need to move ideas outward, so that our debates may have some resonance with wider political and cultural interests.

Website: <http://www.media-culture.org.au/>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Noncommercial - No Derivatives 3.0 License.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>