

## Cinders in the archives

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Not History's Bones,  
But Vocal Tones

(from 'A prophecy' by A Ginsberg 1972, p. 87)

Miljenko Jergović, in his collection of short stories *Sarajevo Marlboro*, cites a 12 year-old boy from Zenica in central Bosnia-Herzegovina, who says 'I know what the speed of light is, but we haven't learned about the speed of darkness yet' (2004, p. 43). This is essentially what this paper is concerned with: that what we know, what is represented, also contains some hint of what we do not know. Within all representations, there is that which is not represented; that which is ungraspable and is nameless.

This paper, in examining these representations (or the lack thereof) is concerned with the various representations of genocide through the Derridean archive. What constitutes these archives of genocide? Although they deal with the dead and with death, they are living archives. They are archives that are at once concerned with the dead and with the inconclusive questions caused for the living by those deaths. In terms of genocide, there are also the archives that have both enabled and disabled genocide and its various responses.

Derrida begins his address of the archive with an exploration of the etymology of the term 'archive', which comes from the Greek word *Arkhé*. It means both a commencement and a commandment<sup>1</sup>. The archive is a place which we take as a starting point, as well as being a

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place which gives or assumes authority. In this we find two streams of thought in one. There is the physical/historical commencement and the legal/nomological place from which command and order are given. In these two streams it is possible to see both the judge and the judged.

Derrida, in looking for the *impression*, the beginning point and the crux of the archive, asks

what is the moment *proper* to the archive, if there is such a thing, the instant of archivization strictly speaking, which is not ... so-called live or spontaneous memory. (1995, p. 25)

For genocide, it would seem that the archive spans the entire 'life' of the event.

In the archives of genocide we see the 'commanding' records directing, allowing and facilitating genocide—the yellow stars, pink triangles, tattooed numbers on arms and other numerous signifiers during the Holocaust; the group classification on identity cards in Rwanda which facilitated the genocide. We then see the physical commencement of genocide in the 'archives' of bodies, the mass graves, the living witnesses. There are also the commanding archives of the courts evidenced in the final judgments handed down and the 'official' documentation and version of the events of a genocide. In the archives of genocide we also see malice—for example, in the disappearance of the Milošević archive and the war time archive of Karadžić, or the burning of books during the Holocaust. There are also the museums, libraries, official archives, memoirs and monuments that subsequently appear.

Genocide is an archive which, as Derrida says, 'produces as much as it records the event' (1995, p. 17). Yet, while the archives of genocide span the event, do they *hold* the event? Can they be truly responsive in a manner that goes beyond judgments and rushes to conclude? This paper is concerned with what is *not* seen in the archives. What is heard and



what is not heard. What is held and what is not held. What eludes an archive which instead documents only that which remains and is collatable from an event? Here, Derrida's thoughts on the cinder are pertinent.

The cinder is beyond the physical archive—it is the trace of the event, not its physical or identifiable, labelled artefacts, nor its coherent, historical language. It is not the 'event', but what remains. It is sound, rather than language. Derrida speaks of the cinder as

the name of trace, namely, something that 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. (1995b, p. 208)

Here is the clue to cinders, then: that when nothing is left behind, there is *something* in the nothing. Derrida goes on to note that cinders include 'someone [who] vanished but something preserved her trace and at the same time lost it' (1991, p. 34).

Derrida's thinking of cinders follows Heidegger's 'mystery of presence' of the trace and, more relevantly here, his reading of Hegel's *Klang*—the ringing at the origin of language, a sound which Heidegger also describes as that of a bell. The *Klang* is the persistent echo—the ringing sound which is not yet speech, but is not silence either. It is a remnant. Hegel thought of this in terms of the Colossi of Memnon, 'the resonating colossal statue that produces a *Klang*' (1986, p. 3a), which made a ringing sound when struck by the sun. The event burns, consuming language in the fire, yet 'sound is the first escape of heat' (Lukacher, in Derrida 1991, p. 3). The sound is the crackling ashes of the burned event. Derrida finds within Hegel's metaphor the unseeable trace which enables us to hear the ring, the trace of what has irretrievably gone before, with only its effects persisting—the *Klang* or, indeed, Derrida's cinders.



What now remains is a persistent heat. Within this, Derrida's cinders refuse the archives of genocide which limit and enclose it through the rationality of historical dates, origins and reasons. Cinders are the ash and the trace, they crumble and burn when we grasp at them; they defy our attempts to place limits, names and ends upon them.

Derrida, in an exploration of the cinders, writes '*il y a là cendre*', and then '*il y a la cendre*' (1991, p. 22). This demonstrates the fragility of the cinder, here personified by the *grave* accent ( ` ) which lies above the *a* in the *là* of the first sentence. The first sentence, '*il y a là cendre*', translates as 'cinder is there', with the emphasis on 'there' (*there* is cinder). The second sentence, '*il y a la cendre*', reads simply 'there is cinder'. When spoken, the words *là* (there) and *la* (the feminine definite article) are indistinguishable to the ear, but when written down, they are distinguished by this *grave* accent. Derrida writes:

*Là* written with an accent *grave*: *là*, there, cinder there is, there, cinder. But the accent, although readable to the eye, is not heard: cinder there is. To the ear, the definite article, *la*, risks effacing the place, and any mention or memory of the place, the adverb *là* ... (1991, p. 21)

In thinking about cinders in terms of this *grave* accent ( ` ), it is possible to see the fragile and flighty cinder that escapes our notice if we are not listening carefully, and even then, it is inaudible; it requires context. It also speaks to the nature of language—the linguistic meanings which are ungraspable and impossible to transcribe.

This leads to the notion of a missing element—the invisible, inaudible cinder. Agamben, in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, speaks of a lacuna—the missing part—in all testimonies or archives of genocide. The lacuna is that which cannot be testified to and which cannot be named. Agamben often notes that this is, in particular, the testament of the person who has been killed through the genocide, who, he notes, is the only person who can testify and yet the



only person who cannot testify. Here, Agamben cites Elie Wiesel, who writes that ‘those who have not lived through the experience will never know; those who have will never tell; not really, not completely ... The past belongs to the dead’ (Agamben 2002, p. 33). The attempts to represent crumble like cinders.

In order to give a preliminary explanation of how the archive, the lacuna and cinders interweave, I borrow Primo Levi’s example from Agamben. Levi 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 ‘nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine’ (in Agamben 2002, p. 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. (2002, p. 39)

But why is it so necessary that we acknowledge this impossibility? That we seek out the cinders and listen for the ringing of the *Klang*? That we search for something which is not language or speech, but a burning, untraceable residue of what once was? Herman Rapaport notes that ‘we have archives – we preserve archives – because there is something in them that defies understanding but that we want to grasp’ (1998, p. 68). It is this, the thing that defies understanding and what is not told, that we do not see, which often tells us the essence of an event. This is the impossibility of the archive and the possibility of the impossible cinders.

What is not told eludes us, leaving instead a lacuna, a missing part. But it is the lacuna which drives the archive—the call to follow and to decipher the cinder and trace that hints



towards it. When we think we have reached the end of our search, completed our archive, there is still a cinder insinuating a missing part. Derrida writes this trace ‘– and near the end, at the bottom of the last page, it was as though you had signed with these words: ‘cinders there are’ (1991, p. 31). When we think we have reached the end of our search, there is still an un-followable cinder, and at its depths a lacuna which can never be found.

That which eludes comprehension is the lived experience of the event and the lived experience of the loss. The focus of the archive tends to be on the death rather than on the individual life and the everyday experience of that loss. We remember statistics and facts of the event and argue over the number of bodies and how justice should be meted out, but there is still this crucial missing part in our understanding of and archival response to genocide. It is an irretrievable lacuna.

This lacuna is inaudible, ungraspable (ash) and unnameable in language—we are left with only the cinders—the hint and the trace. These, too, are ungraspable. Derrida writes ‘– Who is Cinder? Where is she? Where did she run off to at this hour?’ (1991, p. 33). Even when cinders are spoken to in an archive, they crumble and burn at our touch. They always elude us. The *Arechi* (Waste land) poet Nagagiri Masao, writing after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, writes:

You cannot look at death  
When (you think you look at death)  
What you find there are ashes only  
(in Merewether 2006, p. 123)

When we look at an archive of genocide, we cannot see. The cinder is what remains of what is not. It is a remnant of what never existed. A new space coated in the ash. A liminal space. It is impossible to reach into this fiery ash, but it is equally impossible to undo the burning. To undo the persistent nothingness. All we have is the hint of the cinders—present in



Hegel's ringing statue, present in our inability to capture and contain through language and speech. This is the hint that something lies beyond and before.

Something and nothing is ringing the bell, marking our hesitation and wordlessness in Ginsberg's 'vocal tones'. While we try to articulate and speak through the silence, it remains, as Flaubert puts it, that language 'is like a cracked tin kettle, on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when we long to move the stars' (1950, p. 134). We try to grasp and reach beyond the space, through the cinders, beyond the untouchable fire. This is how it is possible that we find ourselves with 10 000 hours of testimonial footage<sup>2</sup>, with never-ending cities full of memorial rock, and with the endless task of making amends. We desire to capture and contain the fire; to reverse the flames. To be 'always calling ... for yet another voice, for one that would bring us still closer to the "you" that speaks in a cinder' (Derrida 1991, p. 14). But we call into an abyss.

An archive of genocide can never contain, conclude or comprehend the genocide—Anna Funder, in her book *Stasiland*, writes of her visit to the exhibition on the German Democratic Republic era at the Contemporary History Forum Leipzig. She writes:

I am annoyed that this past can look so tawdry and so safe, as if destined from the outset to end up behind glass, securely roped off and under press button control ... things have been put behind glass but they are not yet over. (Funder 2002, p. 276)

I am concerned here with what is *not* seen in the archives, with the invisible ash that coats the glass and velvet rope. What is heard and what is not heard. What is held and what is not held. What eludes an archive, which instead documents only that which remains and is collatable from an event? What is left is a space to be filled with (or the cinders onto which



we inscribe) truth or justice or forgiveness, or, equally, with the impossibility of truth, justice and forgiveness. The cinders name

neither truth nor its impossibility, but all the while keeping a space open into which the truth, or its impossibility, might come, a space ... for ... the in-coming of the other. (Lukacher, in Derrida 1991, p. 1)

Cinders, in my understanding, are therefore speaking about a crisis of response to genocide. We, in Western societies, do not like to respond with hesitation or uncertainty, yet we must.

This is so often not a crisis of 'forgetting' or 'remembering' or of 'reconciling'—it is a crisis of *how* to remember and to what end? Ariel Dorfman, in the foreword to *Death and the Maiden*, his play about a woman who had been raped as a political prisoner in an unnamed Latin American country, presents us with a riddle:

how do we keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner? How do we forget it without risking its repetition in the future? Is it legitimate to sacrifice the truth to ensure peace? And what are the consequences of suppressing that past and the truth it is whispering or howling to us? (1994, p. 49)

There are no answers here, only uncertainties. Yet, although fragile, ungraspable and vitreous, the cinders cling and coat—there is weight in the cinders and there is a space to be written upon. This, it is important to remember, is not a space which is only located in the past, or in a courtroom, or in some distant country. Derrida writes that he 'had at first imagined that the cinders were there, not here' (1991, p. 31). The cinders are omnipresent as a space to be filled with possibilities or with impossibilities of response. Jasmina Tesanović, a Serbian writer, talks of the problem of having lost all history and the need to



have something remembered, to salvage something, even if that which is remembered is the loss itself (Tesanović 1999, p. 82).

Instead, archives reduce our histories to symbolic dates and statistics—we look for limits, reason and unifiers. In archiving genocide there seems to be a constant battle to see which genocide was the worst, killed the most people, killed which people and how now to ‘get over’ and respond in a legal setting to the event. Indeed, the focus is generally placed on discussions and disputes over what constitutes and can be named as genocide.

It is vital that we feel the heat of Hegel’s ‘Klang’ and we acknowledge this impossibility, the lacuna, as it tells us that there exists an unspoken and unknowable truth of the event and a truth of being (e.g. those testaments that we can never hear); that we feel Derrida’s ‘Incubation of the fire lurking beneath the dust’ (1991, p. 59).

How do we acknowledge this impossibility? To use a slightly elaborate (but hopefully forgivable) metaphor—imagine a cup of tea made from tealeaves. What is left at the bottom of the cup are the leaves and on the sides are the stains from the tea. The cinders of the tea. At the end of the cup, after the event, the remnants, the leaves, make it undrinkable. We choke on its dregs, but without them there is no tea. Also in these tealeaves, if we are so inclined, we might look for meaning and fortune. Afterwards, the tannin clings. We might scrub clean the tea-stained cup—expunge it of its ashes—to expose a material object that is only made meaningful through the human activity around it. It is given its meaning through the making of the tea, the drinking of the tea, and the reading of the tealeaves and the significance of these activities. This is always an act of engagement and connection from one to the other: the cup to its leaves and stains, and the archives to its ashes.

Is it possible to conceive of an archive which responds to the silence and to the anarchy and to the confusion left by unclassifiable or unremembered events? An archive which is coated



in the ashes? In this I am thinking of an archive not shrouded in or *concealed* by ashes. Rather, I am thinking of an archive which is revealed and made meaningful through the presence of ash. This is an archive which would take some effort to scrub clean (so that its cleanliness would be undesirable), to expunge it of its cinders.

In 2006, I visited the highly chaotic archive of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) archive, which is held in a former prison in the outskirts of Prague. Held there is box after box of documentation produced by the KVM. This archive contains everything from personnel files to daily security briefings to minutes from meetings with personal notes scribbled on the back. Information of the most minute nature has been retained. While some files are of archival interest, several reports devote much space to ongoing requests for those elusive AA batteries. The archive is in perpetual chaos—faxes from Bill Clinton are on a 'recycling pile' on the floor, yet a memo reminding personnel to lock KVM vehicles is neatly filed in triplicate. Whilst such exchange and documentation of information would have been vital for the day-to-day running of the OSCE-KVM, their retention is of no use.

But in all its anarchy, in its seeming loss of focus on what is archivally important and what is usually discarded, and even in its secure, secluded location (and the uses this location was previously put to<sup>3</sup>), this archive gives the clearest symbolic picture of the chaos and also the frustration of responses.

In conceiving of an archive that might represent these impossible-to-hold cinders, I am reminded of an interview that Saidin Salkić gave on Australia's ABC Radio National earlier this year. Salkić is a survivor of the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia and was asked what he remembered from that day. He cited memories (and I am citing my memory of the broadcast here) of the summertime and the smell of his father's jumper, of the flowers growing in his mother's garden. The interviewer interrupted him, steering him towards a



broader, more chronological description of the events of the genocide itself. Salkić responded 'you can't really bundle your memories like that'.<sup>4</sup>

While Derrida and the philosophies around the archive and cinders offer no resolution or explanation for genocide (indeed Derrida's understanding of genocide seems to go beyond the 'text' itself), they do offer a philosophy around response. They allow us to look for what is unsaid, what is unclassified or not present within our archives; and it is this lacuna, this seeming nothingness, which perhaps will tell us the most about the inexpressibleness and the 'unbundle-ability' of genocide.

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## Notes

1. Derrida notes that the original meaning of 'archive' stems from the Greek Arkheion. This was the residence of the Archons—the superior magistrates who made or represented the law. As they held a publicly recognised position of authority, the official documents were kept at their residence. With power or authority, therefore, comes ownership or control over the archive (Derrida 1995, pp. 2-3).
2. I am thinking here of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale which would take approximately 10,000 hours to watch
3. Remembering too the various coincidences and hauntings of writing about a former prison in the Czech Republic using Derrida's theories, when Derrida himself was briefly held in such a place at one time.
4. ABC Radio National, 26th July 2007

