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ARCHIVAL MATERIALS: ESSAYISM AS A PROCESS OF WITNESS, CARE AND RECKONING

Julija Šukys

Archives are about being saved.

— Ashley R. Maynor¹

OVER THE PANDEMIC days of 2020, I took to doing jigsaw puzzles for the first time in my life. In the early spring of our year-long confinement, my son and I put together a surprisingly difficult image of colorful popsicles and ice creams that was all swirls and mottles. After finishing our first challenge, we next chose a lake scene. Mostly sky and water, that one was hard too. The last puzzle I finished was a thousand-piece iteration, an image of four rows of eight painted wooden doors. Each night, I sat and worked until my hips hurt and my husband told me it was time to go to bed. I found it strangely difficult to tear myself away. By then, my son had lost interest, so I worked alone, putting together a whole, fragment by fragment.

I am a lover of archives. Not only the figurative ‘archive’ (singular), that, as the late, great Canadian archivist Terry Cook put it, ‘is usually engaged . . . as a metaphoric symbol, as representation of identity, or as the recorded memory production of some person or group or culture’ but also ‘archives’ (plural), that is, the ‘history of documents over time’.² I see now that my work in the archives resembles that pandemic puzzling. I am drawn to one for the same reasons as I was drawn to the other. Both tasks are methodical: out of the disorder of uncatalogued boxes of letters and cartons of odd-shaped pieces comes order. Puzzles and archives share this: both exist as collections of fragments that, if put together correctly, can be made whole.

But order is only the first step. Work in the archives (plural) may provide a chance to systematize events or facts, but to achieve meaning, a researcher must look up and beyond the pile of dusty papers before her. She needs to step out of the world of records and into the one of ideas, that is, into the archive (singular). It is this oscillation between the ‘small’ (the documentary, historical, fragmentary archives) and the ‘big’ (the metaphorical, philosophical, environmental, global archive) that defines a particular method of essaying that values both the archives and the archive equally. In the archive, an essayist may seek the wisdom and narrative of the oral tradition, woven into textiles, chiseled on stone, stamped into the landscape or cradled by the movement of water. In the archives, she looks for literariness in letters, diaries and even in legal and bureaucratic documents. Archival collections draw in the essayist with their human traces: coffee-stained manuscripts, pressed flowers tucked into letters, notebooks detailing personal financial accounts in their margins, bits of gossip woven into

heroic accounts that live alongside love poems and shopping lists. Drawing on these materials, we may write about conflict, loss and exile, oscillating between the intimate and the political, between documents and the wider world, that is, between archives and the archive. The essay, Graham Good reminds us, is at once ‘the *inscription* of a self and the *description* of an object’.³ ‘It is a negotiation and reciprocal process of discovery between a writer and their materials’.⁴ Any great essay, then, is both about the writer and about something far bigger than her. It is both intimate and expansive, both personal and public.

I did not start out as an essayist, or even as an archival researcher. I came to both callings late, after most of my formal education was behind me. Back when I was a graduate student, the nonfiction and nonfiction-adjacent categories that had been available to me in my slightly old-fashioned, theory-heavy graduate program in comparative literature included historiographical metafiction, memoir and testimony, although these latter two were always framed as problematic because they were supposedly unreliable and undisciplined.⁵ And discipline, at least in the 1990s’ iteration of the University of Toronto’s Centre for Comparative Literature, was the order of the day. Back then, I had not yet come across the term ‘creative nonfiction’ and would not until long after my PhD defense. What is more and even stranger was the total absence of the essay in the catalog of literary forms that we considered deserving of attention and analysis.

In the mid-1990s, trauma theory was all the rage in literary studies. ‘[A] product of the so-called ethical turn affecting humanities’, trauma theory ‘promised to infuse the study of literary and cultural texts with new relevance’, and even to change it for the better.⁶ It applied findings of twentieth-century psychological research into the effects of forces like sexual assault, war, famine and incarceration. Since the 1990s, trauma theory has ‘developed as an interdisciplinary field of study, involving literature, psychology, history and philosophy, with a concentration upon questions of memory, forgetting, and narrative’.⁷ What is more, trauma theory was the sole lens through which beginning scholars were invited to read nonfiction as literature. Together with my cohort, I sat through hours upon hours of Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* and grappled with texts by Primo Levi, Paul Celan and Theodor W. Adorno. We read Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, and argued about the role and ethics of primary and secondary witnessing, that is, ‘witnesses of witnesses, witnesses of the testimonies’.⁸ With horror and fascination, we pored over Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments*, a fraudulent memoir whose author claimed to have been a Latvian child Holocaust survivor when, in reality, he was the Swiss man Bruno Dössekker, born Bruno Grosjean.⁹ At one campus café or another, we wrestled with notions of truth versus Truth, asking ourselves and each other what to do about fallible memory, inadvertent invention, false recollection and straight-up forgetting. Should we believe witnesses unquestioningly? Did contradictions between testimonies disqualify them? Looking back now, I see that those discussions were absolutely essential to my formation as an essayist and to the kind of work I do now. On some level, though, I understood even back then that I would eventually switch gears. I think I saw even then the need for other lenses.

As Matthew Boswell rightly points out, ‘theoretical writing about Holocaust representation has traditionally come to rest on a series of conceptual binaries such as silence and language, truth and lies, and testimony and fiction’,¹⁰ art and fact. About five years

after grad school, I started to bust out of those binaries and to chart a new course for my work. Rather than laying a theoretical framework over texts to read and interpret them (what we students called ‘doing theory’), I started to come at my questions from below, guided by my own curiosity, hunches and idiosyncrasies. And, although my models and teachers have always been other writers and their texts, I made a commitment to work with primary sources, like manuscripts and oral histories, and to try my own version of the *flâneuse* method. In short, I wanted to insert myself into the process of literary production much earlier: at the point of creation rather than only at the point of reception and critique. In time, the questions I considered began to broaden. I started to explore how ideas about memory and narrative that I had acquired in grad school might apply to other histories and voices. Soon, the theoretical texts – including trauma theory – that had formed the center of my literary critical training largely fell by the wayside, even as the lessons they had taught stayed with me. My reading took on an increasingly omnivorous character: those early days saw shelves filled with books about burial rituals, travel guides, thick political treatises, biographies of early twentieth-century writers and histories of libraries and librarianship. Beyond books, my materials were and remain simple: letters, diaries, yellowed photographs, packages of press clippings and the words of ordinary people, sometimes offered as we sit at a kitchen table together. Unformed and fragmentary, the ‘stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered’.¹¹ And though it took me a while to strip away my scholarly armor, to follow my curiosity, define my own methodology and find the courage to put on the page what I really thought, as straightforwardly as possible, eventually I found a new way through writing and thinking. The more I pushed toward exploration and frankness, the lighter I felt. Essaying felt permissive and wild, yet somehow still rigorous. It allowed for both intimacy and critique. The process and form fit me like a glove.

‘The archive is not simple.’ It is a place of ‘contradictory readings’, writes Arlette Farge in *The Allure of the Archives*.¹² As in an essay, there can be no linear movement through the archives, no certain path. To enter the archives with a rigid research plan is to court failure. Archives must be entered with confidence but with flexibility. A researcher needs enough direction and knowledge to find a starting point but must couple this with an openness to the haphazard, to the accident and to the mis-shelved document that reveals an unexpected connection. What is more, a particular kind of researcher is interested not only in what an archive holds but also in who put it together, how and why. A researcher of the archives, that is, one who studies the archives themselves, listens not only to what archives tell but to what they silence.

In Valeria Luiselli’s novel *Lost Children Archive*, for example, the book’s eponymous records will become a portrait of the characters’ experience on a road trip that traces the path of past genocides and present-day family separation at the southern US border: ‘Well stacked on the left side of the trunk are our boxes, five of them, with our archive – though it’s optimistic to call our collected mess an archive – plus the two empty boxes for the children’s future archive.’¹³ Analyzing these two final boxes at the end of the journey – these modest children’s archives – should tell us something of the young travelers who filled them. In time, too, even archives housed in the grandest of libraries will reveal their genesis, the principles of their design, the character of their curator and, perhaps most importantly, what that compiler destroyed or silenced. Archives safeguard stories of power, of erasure and choices made about what to keep versus what to shred: they tell the history of documents over time.

To the essayist, and often to our subjects, the document is a talisman. More than simply ink and parchment, documents hold within them the auras of entire histories,¹⁴ like this one of escape and, ultimately, of a child's arrival in a new land:

a road map of a migration, a testimony of the five thousand miles it traveled inside a boy's pocket, aboard trains, on foot, in trucks, across various national borders, all the way to an immigration court in a distant city, where it was finally unfolded, spread out on a mahogany table, and read out loud by a stranger who had to ask that boy: Why did you come to the United States?¹⁵

Because essayists inhabit contradiction, we come to testimony with openness. We harbor little angst about objectivity, remembering and forgetting because essayism thrives on uncertainty. We ask open-ended questions. We prize the small, the subjective and the idiosyncratic. Although 'historians seem to be embarrassed to turn their attention to their own relationship with the past', not so the essayist.¹⁶ An essayist is equally comfortable receiving testimony as she is with becoming a witness herself.

As Emily Robinson suggests, 'archival research is in large part an affective experience'.¹⁷ Not too long ago, as I was trying to explain my love of archives to a friend, I found myself saying, 'I feel a sense of order and control in the archives. There, I can work through scenarios that otherwise feel overwhelming.' I read for hours in the archives without boredom. This is the great secret of archives: they are riveting. Sitting with archives and really listening to what they have to say is the best way I know to see something new and to understand something better. As I read, I can feel worlds build up inside of me – the people I meet in the manuscripts spring to life before me. I hear their voices in my head and study their faces in photographs. I write them into being as best I can. All this tells me that archives are alive. They are deeply and fundamentally human. They are messages from the past to the future ('[r]ecords anticipate a future archival user'¹⁸), a gift to anyone willing to receive it. In time, if you are patient, the archives will tell you their stories and let you in on their secrets.

But archival essaying does not always look or even feel like library work. Sometimes it is taking a walk or even daydreaming. It is leaving the archives for the archive. Central to my research process is gazing at buildings and sketching their floor plans, so I can write about them in detail later. It is crouching down to examine a broken headstone and tucking a fresh stalk of grass from a cemetery into a notebook, thus juxtaposing the dead and living, the old and the new, the past and present. All this staring and strolling is as valuable as any trip to the stacks or reading room. Famously an idler, a wanderer and a dreamer, the essayist's sites of research are junk shops, flea markets, village squares and narrow alleyways:

How brittle appears the stonework of the walls . . . : crumbling papier-mâché! 'Souvenirs' and bibelots take on a hideous aspect; the odalisque lies in wait next to the inkwell; priestesses in knitted jackets raise aloft ashtrays like vessels of holy water. A bookshop makes a place for manuals of lovemaking beside devotional prints in color; next to the memoirs of a chambermaid, it has Napoleon riding through Marengo and, between cookbook and dreambook, old-English burghers treading the broad and the narrow way of the Gospel. In the arcades, one comes upon types of collar studs for which we no longer know the corresponding collars and shirts.¹⁹

Though our essayistic processes may perhaps not be obviously methodical, at least not to the casual observer, there is nonetheless a method to the value of contemplation of a particular patch of sky or of wandering the halls of a significant building.²⁰ What is more, we have inherited a venerable tradition.

Walter Benjamin, cited above, exemplifies the flâneur par excellence, but I am also thinking of W. G. Sebald, who recorded his English pilgrimage in *The Rings of Saturn*; of Chris Arthur's 'Chestnuts', in which the Irish essayist traces and imagines the epic ocean voyage of a smooth, seductive seed he finds in his late mother's coat pocket; and of Alice Walker's detective-work essay 'Looking for Zora', where the writer embarks on a cross-country search for Zora Neal Hurston's grave.²¹ Like Walker, I understand my own time and life better by wading through knee-deep grasses and knocking on strangers' doors, asking questions about the past. Like Sebald, as I move my body through the world, I note how the world works on this body of mine. The rhythm of footstep after footstep echoes on the page. And like Arthur, by meditating on something as small as a blade of grass, a pressed flower or seed, I learn to think expansively, across time and space. When struggling to write about migration and bureaucracy, I turn to Valeria Luiselli (*Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*), who uses her experience as a translator to give voice to child migrants arriving in the United States on the train route dubbed 'La Bestia'. And when I need a model for writing about violence without perpetuating it, I pick up Assia Djebar (*Algerian White*), who elegizes in ways both intimate and urgent the intellectuals, journalists and artists killed in the brutal Algerian Civil War of the 1990s.²²

An essay, to my way of thinking, is defined by process. That is, essayism resides less in how a text looks than what it does. Here is what I mean.

In *Voices from Chernobyl*, Svetlana Alexievich records and then weaves together the testimony of witnesses and survivors of the 1986 nuclear disaster.²³ By juxtaposing and patching together the stories and testimonies she records, Alexievich tells multifaceted histories and paints a complex and swirling portrait of a catastrophe and its aftermath. Her book presents the Belarusian-Ukrainian border region of the nuclear plant as a poisonous archive. The land and creatures surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear reactors store the record of the meltdown in their cells and DNA (like a fond or a group of files), even as they continue, despite everything, to live:

And the cuckoo is cuckooing, the magpies are chattering, roes are running. Will they reproduce—who knows? One morning I looked out in the garden, the boars were digging. They were wild. You can resettle people, but the elk and the boar, you can't.²⁴

I am perhaps peculiar in considering Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* a kind of essay rather than a work of journalism, as it is usually called. After all, as I say, there is no 'I' in her work, at least not explicitly. But I consider Alexievich's work to be essayistic because of her methods. In my view, the essayism of Alexievich's work resides in this opening up and proliferation of perspectives and experiences. But Alexievich's particular brand of essayism also distinguishes itself by foregrounding techniques of omission, inclusion and arrangement. 'Writing', after all, 'is selection.'²⁵ Having spent months in the field collecting oral histories, the Belarusian essayist returns to her desk.

She sifts through her recordings, files and notes, pulling together fragments and placing them side by side, arranging them for resonance, meaning and rhythm. As readers, we travel the devastated land alongside Alexievich in her memory, her understanding and through the materials she presents. We peer over her shoulder at a list of children born around the explosion, their names forming a catalog of infantile radioactivity, with a rural medical attendant tender caretaker. 'Here', says the attendant:

I have the medical cards right in front of me. Every day I have them. I take them into my hands—every day!

Anya Budai—born 1985—380 becquerels.²⁶

Vitya Grinkevich—born 1986—785 becs.

Nastya Shablovskaya—born 1986—570 becs.

Alyosha Plenin—born 1985—570 becs.

Andrei Kotchenko—born 1987—450 becs.

They say this is impossible? And how can they live with this in their thyroids? But has anyone ever run this sort of experiment before? I read and I see, every day.²⁷

Because we feel the devastation of this caretaker's words alongside Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl* is as much the portrait of a place and its people as it is of a writer's empathy. And empathy, I think, is among the essayist's greatest powers.

'Stories have a weight unto themselves', writes Stephanie Elizondo Griest:²⁸

Immersing yourself in the heavier ones can feel like drowning. Some writers I know drink because of this, as a way of relieving vicarious suffering. I tend to harbor too much guilt to allow such indulgence – *it didn't happen to me; I have no right to grieve* but what is the appropriate reaction to witnessing the pain of others?²⁹

I would like to suggest that an appropriate response to a subject's pain is something like what Alexievich does in her work. I would like to suggest that, in addition to bearing witness and receiving testimony, an essayist's job is to offer a writerly form of care.

Jonathan Walker has posited that '[n]o respectable academic historian would ever describe their task in terms of learning to love the dead'.³⁰ No, perhaps not. But an essayist absolutely would. I myself have described exactly such a relation to my subjects, because the work of the documentary essayist is rooted in a deeply ethical and affective calling. 'Care', as Saidiya Hartman writes, 'is the antidote to violence.'³¹

Years ago, in an essay called 'Pregnant Pause', I worried in writing that the tenderness I felt for my then subject – an anarchist librarian who had saved countless lives in the Holocaust – might have a pernicious effect on my work:

Perhaps, I suddenly realize, my affection . . . has started to blind me. I'm far from the first to feel this way. Like other women writing the stories of foremothers, my affection – my love, even – for my subject obscures my vision. To what extent do we not see what we don't like?³²

Work guided by a sense of affection, responsibility, empathy and care is undeniably fraught. It is risky. The writer faces dangers of appropriation, exploitation and even the inadvertent silencing of her subject. But when done successfully, archival

essaying allows the writer to become a kind of midwife, making it possible for migrant children, assassinated artists, victims of nuclear disaster or enslaved and tortured young African women to leave a trace: a voice, a piece of testimony, a puzzle piece of sorts.

More often than not, the boxes I work with – full of typescripts, transcripts, letters and press clippings – have sat undisturbed year after year. Preserved in them are voices that whisper odd misfit stories in curiously pitched voices. How and when to find them, though, remains a mystery. The voices wait for the right person to arrive – another misfit with just the right combination of linguistic skills, deciphering capabilities and sheer stick-to-itiveness that long hours of archival work require. But above all, that researcher must have patience:

The process of doing archival research is largely organic. . . . The basic methodology of archival research remains the same: read absolutely everything and try to make sense of what happened. It is a bottom-up process and messy as hell – and, more to the point, scary, requiring faith that something will be found, even if it's not what you first went looking for.³³

An essayist loves a typo, a misprint, a strange juxtaposition of texts, an obsolete object ('collar studs for which we no longer know the corresponding collars and shirts') and an unlabeled photograph in the archive. She loves a passport that falsifies the bearer's birthplace or date (as my grandfather's did), as well as its series of stamps that contains within it the story of a life lived on roads, trains, boats and planes. Out of these small shards of humanity grow big questions. Through her work in the archives, an essayist may try to solve conundrums like: Why are humans so cruel? Why do we kill? Why do men hate those unlike themselves? What does it mean to forgive? How do people continue on after tragedy? How might we allow for the dead to speak? How do we recall what has been lost to oblivion?

And, so, we arrive at the question of responsibility. Over the course of my conversations with the dead, I have been thinking about what it means to witness from afar or belatedly. What is our responsibility to the dead? How do we avoid injuring them? No doubt, an observer who arrives at the physical scene or the documentary trace of a tragedy even many years after the fact continues to bear witness, in some way. We latecomer-essayists hear the echoes and observe both the shadows and absences of the past. We testify both to what remains and what has gone missing. In the aftermath of a mass tragedy (a school shooting, for example), once journalists and grief counselors have departed, once their stories and reports have been filed, once an offender's sentence is pronounced, once the dead have been buried and monuments to their memory built, it is tempting to believe it is all over. But no. The work of the archival essayist, that practitioner of the most delicate of the essay's many iterations, begins once the storm has passed.

'We cannot bring back to life those whom we find cast ashore in the archives. But this is not a reason to make them suffer a second death', warns the historian Arlette Farge.³⁴ Yes, the archival essayist has an ethical obligation to her bruised and weather-beaten subjects, and the writer must approach the use and representation of both textual and physical bodies with the utmost care, always safeguarding against exploitation, further injury, voyeurism and cheap thrills. 'Infelicitous speech, obscene

utterances, and perilous commands give birth to the characters we stumble upon in the archive', writes Saidiya Hartman.³⁵ She continues:

Given the condition in which we find them, the only certainty is that we will lose them again, that they will expire or elude our grasp or collapse under the pressure of inquiry. . . . [I]s it possible . . . to tell a story about *degraded matter* and dishonored life that doesn't delight and titillate, but instead ventures toward another mode of writing?³⁶

Could that mode be what I call archival essayism? I wonder.

Assia Djebar dedicated *Algerian White* to the memory of her three 'dear disappeared', that is, brutally murdered, friends: Mahfoud Boucebi, M'Hamed Boukhobza and Abdelkader Alloula.³⁷ The first part of *Algerian White* describes in detail the day of each of her friends' deaths and then, in turn, each of their funerals. She imagines them – a psychiatrist, a sociologist and a playwright – in their last moments of life: 'when they fell one after the other, slaughtered, one upright, walking tall as he was, his head holed in an instant, the second and the third, chest lacerated, ripped with the knife, and they surround him and draw blood, and . . .'.³⁸ Djebar asks: How can we write for the dead and the vulnerable? How do we bear witness to violence we cannot bear to watch? How do we testify to crimes from afar? Where does a writer's right to another's story (to another's body) begin and end?

'[W]riters are always selling somebody out', Joan Didion has famously written in the preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.³⁹ Her statement has never sat well with me. Yes, whenever we presume to write the lives of others, we run a risk of betrayal. But is exploitation – 'selling out' – inevitable?⁴⁰ How grave is the danger of harm when one works almost exclusively with dead subjects? After all, one might ask, how much trouble can a person really get into while reading some old, yellowed papers? How much damage could one possibly do under such circumstances?

More than one might imagine, as it turns out.

The risk of the archives, or rather, the risk of causing harm via the archives, came into focus for me when two stories – those of my grandmother and grandfather – collided. She, Ona, was exiled to Siberia for seventeen years, beginning in 1941. He, Anthony, I learned many years after his death, stood accused of war crimes committed in the weeks following his wife's arrest and deportation by cattle car.

For most of my life, Siberia was an abstract idea. It was, I suppose, a version of Terry Cook's singular archive: it represented the great injustice in my family's collective life, in our collective history. The word 'Siberia' represented not so much a place as a wound, a trauma, a loss. Only in my twenties, shortly after my aunt, Ona's middle child, had died, did my grandmother's place of exile gain the first hint of specificity for me. That was when I inherited the letters my grandmother had written to her children from Siberia. Ours was a story of victimhood and unfortunate accidents – or so I thought, until I found myself working (from below, as it were) with declassified KGB files from the former USSR.

Whereas I had always understood my grandmother's Siberian exile as the wound that shaped our family's fate, the archives ultimately revealed another pivotal moment in what happened to them (my grandparents) and, by extension, to us (their children and grandchildren). That moment was when Anthony agreed to work as a police chief

in German-occupied Lithuania. The papers I had in my possession laid out unprosecuted war crimes accusations against a member of my family – my grandfather. As is apt for an essayist, the documents made their way into my life through a chance encounter and conversation.

It was late spring, and I believed – mistakenly, as it turned out – that I was in the final stages of my Siberian book project when I met a fellow writer for coffee in Toronto. We chatted about our respective projects and my companion asked me if I had ever requested my family's KGB files.

'Yes', I said. I had tried to do so about a decade earlier but to no avail.

'Which archives did you go to?' she asked.

'The ones on Gedimino Prospektas' (in the center of Vilnius), I said. 'The old KGB Building.'

'No, no. That's the wrong place', she said. 'You have to go the archives out in the suburbs. You know, the ones on Oskaro Milašiaus Boulevard.'

With that piece of information, I had found the key to my family's past. The KGB files accused Anthony of overseeing a massacre of civilians in the autumn of 1941. Of more than a thousand Jews who lived in the border city of Newtown, where my grandfather was Chief of Police, only fifteen survived the war.

For several seasons, as I worked my way through the writing of my book, day by day and line by line, I lived inside a slow-moving ethical storm. *Siberian Exile* asks questions about complicity and betrayal, about personal choice, inheritance, memory and truth-telling.⁴¹ It wrestles with the mystery of whether or not descendants of the complicit carry guilt for the crimes of ancestors and what right we have to tell secrets that implicate family members, loved ones and innocent bystanders. It asks questions about how to do justice not only to our own dead but also to those of other communities. Of course, I worried about betraying my family and hurting my late grandmother. But I also felt a deep sense of responsibility to the Jewish women and children who had been shot and buried in a mass grave during my grandfather's tenure as chief of their town's police force. Surely their memory and fate mattered at least as much as my family's. Eventually, as I worked my way through *Siberian Exile*, I began to think of the essayist's responsibility not simply as an avoidance of harm or injuring but also as one of witnessing and reckoning.

In 'Of the Burning', Travis Scholl takes the word 'reckoning' and turns it over and over, examining it from all sides. 'What is *reckoned*', he writes, 'is the disclosure of a secret, a revelation bespeaking more than knowledge, words beyond their meaning.'⁴² What does it mean to have a revelation beyond knowledge? What are meanings beyond themselves? Scholl suggests that to reckon is 'to make things right'.⁴³ Ultimately, I suppose (he supposes) that a reckoning brings with it a kind of freedom.⁴⁴ But for whom? The writer or her subject?

It is right to be suspicious of easy redemption. We should be wary of reckonings that are too smooth or too seamless. After all, 'what do stories afford, anyway?', asks Saidiya Hartman.⁴⁵ 'A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self?'⁴⁶ When Hartman poses this question in her essay 'Venus in Two Acts', where she reflects on the archival work she undertook when writing about the lives and deaths of enslaved African women on the Middle Passage,⁴⁷ the writer does so with an acerbic edge. And though I understand her, I nevertheless want to say, yes. Yes, because stories, thinking on the

page and trying to talk to the dead are what keep us alive when we are called to reckon with the crimes of and (worse) against the dead. ‘Beauty’, as Hartman writes later (though, again, she does so in the form of a question), can indeed ‘provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to . . . reanimate the dead.’⁴⁸ If beauty and care can give life, then perhaps – whether familiar or strange – reckoning might offer to the dead a kind of justice. The ultimate question is how we essayists use archives, to what purpose and with what regard for our subjects. When handling the remains of the dead – especially victims of violence – the artist’s supreme responsibility is to respect and dignify both bodies and spirits.

Archives reward a diligent, patient and generous researcher. Their smells and textures offer calm. Collections call on the researcher-essayist to resist tidy narratives and simple explanations of complex events and questions. In the archives, an essayist may trace processes of recording, cataloguing, remembering and thinking. She may read a life represented either from moment to moment (as it appears in diaries) or all at once and with the advantage of retrospection (as happens in memoir manuscripts and certain kinds of letters). In doing this work, the essayist bears witness to both the beauty and brokenness of life. She receives testimony across time. She may even succeed in bridging the fissures that cleave the past from the present.

No, the essay need not deal in treachery. It need not sell anyone out, least of all the dead. On the contrary, essayism can be a source of wisdom; its result may take the form of a praise song, a portrait, a puzzle, a call and response, a gift, a catalog, a meditation and more. To essay in the archives is to build a bulwark against darkness. Perhaps the work of essaying is even a source of light.

Notes

1. Ashley R. Maynor, ‘Libraries & Librarians in the Aftermath: Our Stories & Ourselves’, *Collaborative Librarianship* 11, no. 1 (2019): 61–81 (66).
2. Terry Cook, ‘The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape’, *The American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011): 600–32 (601, 600).
3. Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 23, italics in original.
4. Nicole B. Wallack, ‘The “Subversive Possibilities” of the Essay for Public Intellectuals’, in *The Essay at the Limits: Poetics, Politics and Form*, ed. Mario Aquilina (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 63–76 (68).
5. In ‘Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, Dori Laub rehearses this argument and counterargument. He describes a survivor recounting the destruction of four chimneys at Auschwitz during its uprising: ‘A lively debate ensued. The testimony was not accurate, historians claimed. The number of chimneys was misrepresented. Historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four. Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept – nor give credence to – her whole account of the events. It was utterly important to remain accurate, least [*sic*] the revisionists in history discredit everything.’ Dori Laub, ‘Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57–74 (59–60).
6. Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.
7. Chris Baldick, ‘Trauma Theory’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), n.p.

8. *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (Paris: Parafrance Films, 1985), film; Shoshana Felman, 'The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah', in *Testimony*, 204–83 (213).
9. Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (New York: Schocken Books, 1996).
10. Matthew Boswell, 'Beyond Autobiography: Hybrid Testimony and the Art of Witness', in *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing*, ed. Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (New York: Routledge, 2014), 144–59 (144).
11. Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017), 7.
12. Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 38.
13. Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (New York: Knopf, 2019), 42.
14. For a meditation on and dramatization of the way objects carry histories, see *The Red Violin (Le Violon Rouge)*, directed by François Girard (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Video, 1999), DVD.
15. Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends*, 43.
16. Emily Robinson, 'Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible', *Rethinking History* 14, no. 4 (December 2010): 503–20 (505).
17. *Ibid.*, 510.
18. Katherine Biber and Trish Luker, 'Evidence and the Archive: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Emotion', *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014): 1–14 (6).
19. Walter Benjamin, 'Arcades', in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 871–72 (872).
20. Gesa E. Kirsch, 'Being on Location: Serendipity, Place, and Archival Research', in *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, ed. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 20–27 (22).
21. W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1998); Chris Arthur, 'Chestnuts', in *On the Shoreline of Knowledge: Irish Wanderings* (Iowa City: Sightline Books, University of Iowa Press, 2012), 1–21; Alice Walker, 'Looking for Zora', in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 231–43.
22. Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends*; Assia Djebar, *Algerian White: A Narrative*, trans. David Kelley and Marjolijn de Jager (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000).
23. Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, trans. Keith Gessen (Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005); also published as *Chernobyl Prayer*, trans. Anna Gunin and Arch Tait (London: Penguin Classics, 2016).
24. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 49.
25. John McPhee, 'Omission', *The New Yorker*, September 7, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/14/omission>.
26. One becquerel is the activity of a quantity of radioactive material in which one nucleus decays per second.
27. Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 118.
28. Stephanie Elizondo Griest, *All the Agents and Saints: Dispatches from the U.S. Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 98.
29. *Ibid.*, italics in original.
30. Jonathan Walker, 'James Ellroy as Historical Novelist', *History Workshop Journal* 53, no. 1 (2002): 181–204 (187).
31. Saidiya Hartman, 'On Working with Archives: An Interview with Writer Saidiya Hartman', by Thora Siemsen, *The Creative Independent*, February 3, 2021, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives>

32. Julija Šukys, 'Pregnant Pause: On Ona Šimaitė, Archives, Life-Writing and Motherhood', *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 2 (2010): 1–17 (7).
33. David Gold, 'The Accidental Archivist: Embracing Chance and Confusion in Historical Scholarship', in *Beyond the Archives*, 13–19 (18).
34. Farge, *Allure of the Archives*, 121.
35. Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14 (6).
36. *Ibid.*, 6–7, italics in original.
37. Djebar, *Algerian White*, 15.
38. *Ibid.*, 17.
39. Joan Didion, 'A Preface', in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), xi–xiv (xiv), italics in original.
40. In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch asks, 'What do we owe the victims? How can we best carry their stories forward, without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them? How are we implicated in the aftermath of crimes we did not ourselves witness?' Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 2.
41. Julija Šukys, *Siberian Exile: Blood, War, and a Granddaughter's Reckoning* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).
42. Travis Scholl, 'Of the Burning' (unpublished manuscript, consulted November 2020), 162, italics in original.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 3.
46. *Ibid.*
47. See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
48. Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 3.