words will break cement

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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April 27, 2015

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For all the people who have lived and died.
I bear witness to your existence.

Thank you

Byron Rich
Darren Miller
Ian F. Thomas
The donors of the Kleeman, Senior Project, and Class of 1939 Funds

Mara Silver for letting me know you.
Janos Cseh for knowing me.

Eucracia Vasquez for running when the water receded.

On August 4, 1946 a massive earthquake shook the Dominican Republic.[1] Only about a hundred people were killed due to the quake, as it occurred on a major holiday when many people were outside. However, the earthquake resulted in a tsunami that hit the Bahá Escocia and entered a kilometer inland thus sweeping the city of Matanzas and several villages into the ocean. The number of dead due to drowning is estimated to be anywhere between 100 and 1,790. he high number is attributed to people going to pick up fish exposed on the beach due to the tide receding.[2] The way my great grandmother told the story is different. According to her, as soon as the ocean receded people started grabbing every child in sight and running towards high land. She grabbed her own infant and made it to safety, along with almost everyone in her village, but never got to see her home again. The discrepancy is due in large part to the efforts of Dictator Rafael Trujillo to silence the story for political reasons, giving new meaning to the town motto "entra si quieres, sale si puedes[3]."

She told me this story, along with other stories, when I was very young. Most I don't remember; I was too young to write them down but there are a few that I committed to memory. I know that she grew up in Matanzas, a village next to the beach, with her grandmother whose skin was so dark her name was Negra. She was a teacher like her father and one of 7 children. Her

[1] Loughlin, Karen Fay, and James F. Lander. "Education about Tsunami Risks." In *Caribbean Tsunamis: A 500-year History from 1498-1998*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 82-83.
[2] Ibid.
[3] "Enter if you wish, leave if you can" in reference to the notoriously rough waters of the area.

brother was a member of La Guardia Nacional Dominicana[4], implicating him in the atrocities ordered by El Jefe. This played a huge role in his murder as well as the murder of their father.

I was not aware of the complicated political history plaguing the island for most of the 20th century nor how resilient 500 years of doom luck is. All I knew were these stories and that my favorite stretch of beach on the island was filled with the residuals of long forgotten architecture. I did not understand very much of these fragments at the time, but these relics carried a history of loss of life and culture. They mark a monumental event in the history of a people; an event that was repressed in archives and invalidated in written history.

words will break cement is my way of bearing witness to our collective history. Set within a darkened room, this installation comprises an edition of eight cement pillars in various states of ruination. These columns stand at approximately four feet in height and sixteen inches in width and are constructed of cement and metal reinforcements. Within each column is a speaker that plays one of eight tracks. These tracks are simple recordings of the names of the deceased for the year of 1946 in the town of Matanzas being spoken out loud[5]. All of these columns are situated within a pool of water which has been tinted with dye, giving it a very dark blue-black appearance and allowing for any residue on the surface to be readily apparent.

In an essay in On Kawara's *Consciousness, Meditation, Watcher on the Hills*, Osho discusses the process of knowledge as such:

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[4] Technically the National Guard, but for a period, the secret police.

[5] Considering this town was functionally destroyed in 1946, very few records were available. However, I was able to locate a limited set of death records. I cannot speak to the completeness of these records as this tsunami occurred mid-year and drowning deaths from the event may not have been recorded. Furthermore, many residents chose to leave to the city of Nagua instead of relocating to Matancitas, meaning many individuals who would be included in these records are elsewhere.

> All knowledge, whatsoever you know, is revealed through the faculty of knowing. Knowing is your faculty. Knowledge is gathered through this faculty. But knowing reveals two things: the known and the knower. Whenever you are knowing a rose flower, your knowledge is half if you forget the knower who is knowing it. So while knowing a rose flower there are three things: the rose flower – the known; and the knower – you; and the relationship between the two – knowledge.[6]

Through my exposure to the subjects of this event in Matanzas and the physical remnants of its occurrence, I have come to feel as if I know people who are just as far removed from this time and place as I am. My desire was to make the viewer(the knower) know of others (the known) and through this knowledge, create living remnants of this event- witnesses.

If what Renee Green claims is true, if "to be a subject and to bear witness are the same and that same is-remnant" then this process is one of ongoing mobility, one in which the subject of an event can bear witness and testify in a cycle that can be continued indefinitely[7] :

> If we now return to testimony, we may say that to bear witness is to place oneself in one's own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living -- in any case, outside both the archive and the corpus of what has already been said. It is not surprising that the witness' gesture is also that of the poet, the *auctor* par excellence. Hoderlin's statement that 'what remains is what the poets found' (*Was bleibt, stiften die Dichter*) is not to be understood in the trivial sense that the poetic word is the one that is always situated in the position of a remnant and that can, therefore, bear witness. Poets -- witnesses-- found language as what remains, as what actually survives the possibility, or impossibility, of speaking.[8][9]

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[6] Kawara, On. *On Kawara : Consciousness, Meditation, Watcher on the Hills* (Dijon, France: Les Presses Du Réel :, 2007), 15-21.
[7] Merewether, Charles, and Renee Green. "Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae." In *The Archive* (London: Whitechapel ;, 2006), 49-55.
[8] Merewether, Charles, and Giorgio Agamben. "The Archive and Testimony." In *The Archive*. (London: Whitechapel ;, 2006), 38-40.
[9] Green, *Survival,49-55* .

Through their exposure to this event through this environment, the viewer is made into a remnant. They become witnesses to this event by proxy and are capable of continuing the cycle of testimony if they are so inclined.

However, although this installation is based on this event, the emphasis is on the acknowledgement of the known by the knower and not the historical event itself. The specifics of this event are never directly addressed in its presentation because in many ways they are incidental. Matanzas is not spectacular. In its unremarkableness, though, lies the potential for testimony of a different sort. At any point, we as knowers can allow these people to speak. We can make our own judgements, validate their existence and bear witness to their experiences. We can allow them to haunt us. The Archive allows us to reflect on an event, but more so it allows us to reflect on ourselves, our histories, perceptions, and identities. Therein lies the power of the Archive- a power that memory and history do not possess individually. The Archive allows for historical imagination and creation.

The relationship of history to memory is one that is discussed frequently in the field of historiography with the archive mentioned as an apparatus within that relationship. In *History and Memory*, Jacques Le Goff made the claim that history has usurped the role of memory through its inclusion in academia and systems of mass education.[10] In a society that has recently become preoccupied with empirical evidence, the written word can effectively validate or invalidate experiences. As a result of this, there is no longer an universal trust in memory. To the contrary,

[10] Le Goff, Jacques. *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 87-89.

memory is seen as vulnerable to corruption. Because of this shift, history has superseded the role of memory as the foremost tool of remembering.

Michel Foucault goes so far as to suggest that this exaltation of history has led to its misuse and that, in effect, it distorts and clutters our memory:

> History… is certainly the most erudite, the most aware, the most conscious, and possibly the most cluttered area of our memory; but it is equally the depths from which all beings emerge into their precarious, glittering existence. Since it is a mode of being of all that is given us in experience, History has become the unavoidable element in our thought.[11]

Historical writing provides a way of thinking about a very specific place--memory. However, to truly interrogate that place history writing must be less fixated on physical output. It should instead be on the philosophical process-on ideas, ideation, and remembering- with the Archive being the framework within which to remember.. [12]

The Archive offers a space for memory to exist and thrive. It is the raw material for a narrative to be created by whoever has access to it and chooses to engage with it. Individuals have sought to record information since the advent of writing. These documents have come to us in the form of countless libraries, records, bureaucracies and as such, the Archive as a physical entity allows for the induction of people into the collective memory. This becomes a new potential to provide a wealth of information. It can give insight into periods and events by acting as a method of communication between the past and the present. However, in many ways it serves as a void-abundant in volume, but that obscuring in abundance. No matter how large or detailed an archive

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[11] Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 219.

[12] Steedman, Carolyn. *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 68.

is, there is never really much to be differentiated. The archive is a carefully curated collection, a fragment of human knowledge.

As an intangible space, the Archive allows for the engagement of the past and the selective writing of History.[13] What is viewed as important and what gets preserved speaks volumes about the power of particular events and experiences, as well as the values of a group. What does not make it in can say even more. Archival lacunae can be attributed to the passage of time, inescapable destruction or sheer loss of interest. These gaps can also be redactions, because the information was considered unimportant or damning. In this capacity, the Archive has potential. It's just *stuff.* And it remains just *stuff* until it is read, used, and narrativised.[14] How that data is narrativised is very much dependent on who accesses it and what the ultimate function of this narrative will be.

We see the archive function in three main capacities: as a tool for power and control, as a source of origin and identity, and as a way of communing with the dead and bearing witness. The tsunami of the Bahá Escocia presents us with a unique lens with which to analyze the multi-functional nature of the Archive and its intersection with History and memory.

In Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, the archive is presented as a tool of state power and control due to the authority given to it by an empirically minded populace.[15] Derrida does not address the Archive in its physical form; instead, he refers to the formal written history that results

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Steedman, *Dust, 68.*
[15] Derrida, Jacques, and Eric Prenowitz. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9-36.

from it.[16] He uses the injustices of the 20th century as an example of the selective use of the Archive, a curation in which what was left unsaid and undocumented played as much of a role as what was repeatedly mentioned, and the resultant abuse of a populace.

> The disasters which mark the end of the millennium, are also *archives of evil*: hidden or destroyed, forbidden, misappropriated, "repressed." Their usage is once clumsy and refined, during civil or international wars, during private or secret intrigues.[17]

The "fever" or evil referred to in the title of his work refers to this process[18][19]. Not only did the Archive directly impact the outcomes of those events, but its manipulation directly altered how those events were perceived as well the players. Denying certain people entrance to the annals of history not only controls a group, but also allows for control of the perceptions of outsiders looking in.

We see a similar pattern of silencing over the course of Trujillo's 31 year reign. In her report, Herridge de Guerrero notes that Trujillo stifles the story of this natural disaster for fear of political backlash.[20] In fact, Lynch and Bodle directly mention that they were sent on their investigation by Trujillo to allay people's fears about the continuing earthquakes.[21] Other than their reports, though, there is very little in the written record about this incident with a great many of the details being unclear. His rewriting of history was far reaching and very successful. To this

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[16] Steedman, *Dust,8.*
[17] Derrida, *Archive Fever.*
[18] Steedman, *Dust,* 18.
[19] Steedman makes an excellent observation on Derrida's translation of his title. Although the English translation uses the term "fever" the French term "mal" cuts to the point, being a term whose connotation is closer to that of "evil" or "wrong doing" than the simple illness that is implied in English. Furthermore, that term "fever" in British English versus American English is one that is also incongruent, with the British term signifying a very serious illness as diagnosed by a doctor, not simply "running a temperature" as the term is usually used in the United States.
[20] Loughlin and Lander, *Caribbean Tsunamis,* 82-83.
[21] Ibid.

day, the amount of people who were murdered or disappeared during that period, as are much of the details of life on the Island, are unknown. Through his efforts, Trujillo limited acknowledgment of the suffering faced by Dominicans at his hands. More troubling is that through his rewritings, he contributed to the erasure of the traditional bindings of identity that stem from a communal origin and history.

As a source of identity, the Archive allows for a recreating of the past through historical imagination. The Western dependency on documentation gives the illusion that we can fully and accurately recreate it if we find the *right* document, the *right* tidbit of information, the point of origin easily locatable if we know where and what to look for.[22] It is a process that seeks historical insight through materials. However, through the process of searching, the object is increasingly changed as the search complicating its meaning.

Searching for identity through the Archive is an attempt to confirm the searchers preconceived sense of self through historical identification. The past is *gone*. No effort can truly rebuild it. However, the attempt is made and written histories are formed with an end in mind. Regardless of the veracity of the claims, the Archive and written history work together to uniting people in sameness.In that capacity it acts as a binding force.

Through the process of radical restructuring and archivization, Trujillo was able to alter history and group identity--uniting a nation under a quintessential “Dominican-ness”.[23] To this day, Dominican identity is still heavily based in the ideals of Trujillismo. For those outside of these ideals, this identity comes with the burden of state-sponsored and self-erasure. Through his

[22] Steedman, *Dust, 68.*
[23] Danticat, Edwidge. "Junot Díaz by Edwidge Danticat." *Bomb - Artists in Conversation* (September 1, 2007).

actions, Trujillo relegated their history to the realm of the oral, of the unreal, of magic. This is not necessarily uncommon in Latin America. This kind of behavior is closely related to the effects of post-colonialism in the area, in part giving prominence to magical realism in the artistic tradition.[24]

The written works of Junot Diaz, especially *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, focus on the diaspora and the long reaching effects of Trujillismo on the Dominican-American experience. His stories encapsulate what it means to be Dominican in America; to be as far removed from a culture, an age, and lineage as you are physically from a nation. Yet, one is never truly allowed to assimilate. There is a sense of always having to explain your very being to everyone. He manages to depict the erasure of identity and lineage, as well as the rewriting of culture and history of a people by an individual. He gives words to how this sense of loss and never belonging continue to affect people thousands of miles and decades removed. A major motif in Diaz's work is the idea of a fukú, a traditional curse of the land specifically related to the colonization of the New World and its aftermaths including (but not limited to) centuries of abuse, slavery, and genocide.[25] Santo Domingo, as the oldest city of the New World, serves as Ground Zero and suffers most because of this history. This understanding of a supernatural phenomenon as real, as present and acknowledged is "to be a true witness to who we are as a people and to what has happened to us."[26]

Diaz questions the tendency to separate logic, science and reality from myth, superstition, and irrationality and to label them as European and indigenous respectively.[27] That structure has

[24]Ibid.
[25]Danticat, *Bomb.*
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

historically served to marginalize indigenous people and mythologize their very existence. On the other hand, this system along with the consistent abuse of written history has allowed for oral history to take precedent. The idea that a curse can be a way of bearing witness to a collective history, one that predominantly resides in the oral tradition, is frequently marginalized and riddled with suffering. It is one that speaks to the power of memory and history. It is an acknowledgement of the experiences of the dead and a testimony to their existence, one in which they are quite literally allowed to have meaning in the current day. It speaks to the ability of a society to create their own legends and assume their identities under these stories.

This idea of bearing witness, of being made into the remnant of an event of experience, is mirrored in the writing of Jules Michelet among others. In January 1824, Michelet had a moment of realization while reading the works of Giambattista Vico captured in the statement ”Humanity is its own creation” in reference to the following passage[28]:

> In the light of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity; so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.[29]

The work of Vico impressed on Michelet the potential of the Archive as a tool for returning the myriad dead, those who had never truly lived, into the world of the living not just as living creatures but individuals whose existence had meaning.[30] Through his work in the Archive he sought to give them a second life much like he would like himself after his passing:

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[28] Steedman, *Dust, 68.*
[29] Ibid, *70.*
[30] Ibid,

> I have given to many of the disregarded dead the assistance that I shall myself need. I have exhumed them for a second life...They live now among we who feel ourselves to be their parents, their friends. Thus is made a family, a city community of the living and the dead.[31][32]

By projecting what he has understood through the remnants of their lives, Michelet has taken on the role of witness, becoming a remnant in the process.Through the process of subjectification and desubjectification (in which the living becomes speaking and the speaking become living) an intimacy is reached. The knower becomes complicit to the experience and gives testimony on behalf of the dead, the knower becomes their proxy, allowing them to finally have their say.

words will break cement is dependent on its viewer to carry on as a witness to things lost, things caught between the said and the unsaid. The Archive allows us to be a part of this accretive process. It is a method of control and vindication, as well as a tool for creation and memorialization. Within the Archive, we are allowed to know and in that knowledge we are allowed to reclaim what is lost.

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[31] "J'ai donné à beaucoup de morts trop oubliés l'assistance dont moi-même j'aurai besion. Je les ai exhumés pour une seconde vie...Ils vivent maintenant avec nous qui sentons leurs parents, leurs amis. Ainsi se fait une famille, une cité commune entre les vivants et les morts."

[32] Steedman, *Dust*, 71.

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