

## Archive of Dust, or Other Hydrocarbons

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Writing in the 1860s, French historian Jules Michelet recalled that as he breathed in the dust of the archives, he saw the dead emerge from their shrouds. “Et à mesure que je soufflais sur leur poussière,” he wrote, “je les voyais se soulever.”<sup>1</sup> It was, as Carolyn Steedman observes, “death that he took into himself with each lungful of the past,” but every expiration would then reanimate the corpses.<sup>2</sup> As a historian, Michelet felt himself charged with solicitude and mindfulness for the forgotten dead and bygone things. The mournful, and yet hopeful, musings of the great historian—who, in effect, had invented the “Renaissance”—surely shape and inform artist Elena del Rivero’s own archive of dust. On September 11, 2001, as the World Trade Center collapsed and burned near her studio in Lower Manhattan, she could not avoid breathing in the dust and smoke issuing from the ruins—the “aerosol plume” in technical parlance. She remembers choking on the dust, trying to spit it out, making herself sick. She still recollects its particular stench and course texture. It was coating Lower Manhattan. “What can be made of such remains, these survivals, of destruction?”, del Rivero asks us. “What becomes of the remainder?”, she demands to know.

In the weeks after the destruction of the World Trade Center, scavengers began profiteering from selling grieving relatives samples of debris and dust. To prevent the collection of such illicit souvenirs, the city of New York set up an official, more respectful, procedure for distribution of “remains.” Workers filled three 55-gallon drums with powdered material from the site, blessed by a chaplain, and conveyed these goods to police headquarters in Lower Manhattan. A United States’ flag draped each drum, and two honor guards stood sentry. In mid-October 2001, journalist Amy Waldman observed: “the officers are filling at least 4,000 small round urns of polished cherry mahogany with powdered debris,” to be bestowed on victims’ families. “The soil, brown with a slightly grayish cast, is unhealthy in appearance,” Waldman wrote. “It crunches slightly when the spoon is placed in it, and it is thick enough that the spoon stands on its own.”<sup>3</sup> The dust, contained in an urn, somehow constituted a memento of the dead, a persistent remainder, or reminder. Once waste, it had acquired singular value.

We have a good idea what was in this dust. In various samples, environmental health experts found inorganic matter that included metals, radionuclides, ionic species, and asbestos. In the organic analyses, they identified polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, polychlorinated biphenyls, polychlorinated dibenzodioxins, polychlorinated dibenzofurans, pesticides, phthalate esters, brominated diphenyl ethers, and other hydrocarbons. The dust was

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Michelet, “Preface de l’Histoire de France [1869],” in *Oeuvres complètes*, tome 4 (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), 613-14.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Steedman, “Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust,” *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 1159-80, 1171.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Waldman, “With Solemn Detail, Dust of Ground Zero is Put in Urns,” *New York Times* (October 15, 2001): B1.

alkaline in nature. Tellingly, the remnants of the bodies of loved ones were elusive, at most reduced to “other hydrocarbons” at the end of a long list.<sup>4</sup> The scientists wanted to reveal human exposures, and potential future risks, not identify human remains. They were concentrating on toxicity rather than consolation and reassurance. Handling, and even inhaling, powdered human remains was not a significant risk factor, a cause for concern. “The inability to distinguish, to tell body from body or flesh from rubble,” was not an issue for them, as it was for literary critic Patricia Yaeger. She was acutely aware of “the bodies of the dead mingling with this debris.” She wondered: “How do we respond to trauma when the only thing left is ‘stuff?’”<sup>5</sup> When all we have is an archive of dust? “How does one cope with devaluation and with the body’s vanishing?” Yaeger asked.<sup>6</sup> In other words, how do we recognize who haunts this material, or find value in waste?

Dust has long been recognized as a nuisance, an irritant, and a toxin in the United States and elsewhere. Such environmental apprehensions have always been situated, or localized, whether in mines or factories or offices or homes. As Samuel Hays notes, these ecological imaginaries were “not abstract matters . . . they were about places where one worked and lived, physical settings that one valued and that often were endangered.”<sup>7</sup> Dust signified risk in particular modern places. The toxicological approach to workplace risk had developed in the early twentieth century, organized as the discipline of industrial hygiene, later occupational health. As historian Christopher Sellers explains, specialized hygienists “modelled the industrial microenvironment, including its human inhabitants, in terms of measurable poisons and dusts controllable through quantitative modelling aimed at safe concentration levels.”<sup>8</sup> But what is the safe concentration of inhaled ashes?

In 2003, New York City and federal health officials began, in a perfunctory manner, long-term health monitoring of the hundreds of thousands exposed to the dust of the World Trade Center. “While there has been a growing consensus since the attack that thousands of people may have grown ill because of the toxic mix of dust, debris, smoke and chemicals that were released when the towers collapsed,” Marc Santora wrote in the *New York Times*, “there is still no definitive answer to what exactly is in the dust or to how many people suffered because of their

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<sup>4</sup> Paul J. Liroy, Clifford P. Weisel, James R. Millette, Steven Eisenreich, et al., “Characterization of the Dust/Smoke Aerosol that Settled East of the World Trade Center (WTC) in Lower Manhattan after the Collapse of the WTC, 11 September 2001,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 110, no. 7 (2002): 703-14.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Yaeger, “Rubble as Archive, or 9/11 as Dust, Debris, and Bodily Vanishing,” in *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, ed. Judith Greenberg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 187-94, 187, 188.

<sup>6</sup> Yaeger, “Rubble as Archive,” 193.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Hays, *Beauty, Health and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 36. See also Christopher Sellers, “Body, Place, and the State: The Makings of an ‘Environmental’ Imaginary in the Post-World War II United States,” *Radical History Review* 74 (1999): 31-64.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Sellers, “Factory as Environment: Industrial Hygiene, Professional Collaboration and the Modern Sciences of Pollution,” *Environmental History* 18 (1994): 55-83. See also David Rosner and Gerald E. Markowitz, eds., *Dying for Work: Workers’ Safety and Health in Twentieth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), and their *Deadly Dust: Silicosis and the Politics of Occupational Disease in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

exposure.”<sup>9</sup> It was certain, however, that many of the first responders developed respiratory problems from breathing in dust and smoke. Some survivors talked of scarred lungs and increased risk of cancer. “There’s no way you can’t get sick after smelling all that dust and dirt,” the widow of a police officer who had worked at ground zero told a reporter.<sup>10</sup> “There is still much that we do not know about the full nature and long-term health effects of the destruction of the World Trade Center,” Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said in 2006, “but we do know that some people, particularly those who were caught in the dust cloud, have experienced serious physical and psychological distress.”<sup>11</sup> Partial monitoring continued in the years after the attack, and special clinics were established at Mount Sinai and Bellevue hospitals. In 2011, President Barack Obama signed into law a bill covering the health-care costs for rescue workers and others “sickened by toxic fumes and dust” from the terrorist attack ten years earlier.<sup>12</sup>

As the fifth anniversary approached, the New York Historical Society decided to install a “time capsule” of the effects of the destruction of the towers. Dust-covered clothing comprised most of the display. As they assembled the exhibition, the “hazard team wore respirators with compound filters to protect them from noxious particulates and organic vapors, and their Tyvek suits were designed to keep static electricity from attracting the dust.” Since so many believed that their loved ones’ remains were present in the residue of ground zero, the dust was treated with special respect in this “diorama of tragedy.” “It is always dangerous to disturb toxic dust,” a reporter noted, “but this dust is historic, and possibly sacred.”<sup>13</sup> Toxic. Historic. Sacred. What does it mean that dusty piles of potential poison are what remain of our loved ones? When the remainder might also be a calculable risk factor?

Surely, we are witnessing here the manifestation of Jacques Derrida’s “archives du mal.” As he observed presciently in an insert in the French edition of *Mal d’archive* (1995): “Les désastres qui marquent cette fin de millénaire, ces sont aussi des archives du mal: dissimulées ou détruites, interdites, détournées, ‘refoulées.’”<sup>14</sup> For Derrida, then, the archive was not just a place of memories. But what might he have made of the *archive of dust* from the towers that keeps materializing with unrelenting repetition, whether toxic or sacred? For Michelet, figures from the past haunted the fragrant dust of the archive. Derrida’s archive, in contrast, was less fixed and predictable and congenial. As he put it, we have no concept of the archive, only an impression, “an insistent impression through the unstable feeling of a shifting figure, of a schema, or of an in-finite or indefinite process.” So, what impression does this dogged archiving of toxic, sacred dust make? To suffer archive fever, a toxic reaction, according to Derrida is to have “a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a

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<sup>9</sup> Marc Santora, “Study Finds Lack of Data on Health Effects of 9/11 Dust,” *New York Times* (September 8, 2004): B1.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Haskett-Godbee quoted in Anthony de Palma, “Tracing Lung Ailments that Rose with 9/11 Dust,” *New York Times* (May 13, 2006): A1.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Bloomberg quoted in Diane Cardwell, “City Announces Plan to Deal with Health Problems Relating to Ground Zero,” *New York Times* (September 6, 2006): B4.

<sup>12</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Obama Signs Bill to Help 9/11 Workers,” *New York Times* (January 2, 2011): A17.

<sup>13</sup> Glenn Collins, “9/11 Shrine, with the Tragic, Toxic Dust,” *New York Times* (August 25, 2006): B1.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Prière d’insérer,” in *Mal d’archive: Une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée, 1995) quoted in Steedman, “Something She Called a Fever,” 1162.

homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”<sup>15</sup> To the scene of the crime; to the moment of loss. And not so much to recover the past as to shape the future, or at least to make it more habitable.

But an archive of *dust*? Derrida was no fan of cremation. In *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2011), he argues that all thought of death is also thought of survival, the survival of the remainder, the remains. Funeral rites “deliver the corpse over to its future.”<sup>16</sup> Cremation, however, made him think of the crematoria of the camps, a means of annihilation less “immunitary” than burial, for instance. Fire seemed to him to make “the labor of mourning both infinite and null.” But what if these ashes, this dust, were instead an aerosol plume, breathed in by thousands? Derrida favored burial of the remains, where “the posthumous is becoming the very element, mixes in everywhere with the air we are breathing.”<sup>17</sup> Part of the air we breathe. Such is our archive of toxic dust, a repetitive return to what remains, a haunting—breathed in.

Mourning, Sigmund Freud observed, is the normal “reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”<sup>18</sup> According to Derrida, our mourning “consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present.”<sup>19</sup> We need to hold on to what we have lost, to allow the haunting of some substitute object. But we recognize that eventually the libido, as Freud put it, must withdraw from attachment to that object, that stuff, even if for a time there is a desperate “clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis.” Only when the work of mourning is complete can “the ego become free and uninhibited again.”<sup>20</sup> The continuing fetishizing of dust from the ruins in Lower Manhattan shows us how long and painful the work mourning can be; that is, how we might still cling to, or deeply inhale, the toxic archive, find value in its hauntings, despite, or perhaps because of, the dangerous materiality.

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans, Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29, 91.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 2, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 132.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 2, 169, 179.

<sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” [1917], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. XIV (1914-16): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 237-58, 243.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 244, 245.