

## ***‘Somewhere to Store All Those Memories’: Archive Fever in Simone Lazaroo’s *Lost River****

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We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building.  
The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal. Still,  
not every building is a dwelling.

—Martin Heidegger *Poetry, Language, Thought*

Simone Lazaroo’s fiction has been vitally concerned with how we cope with our mortality. Her most recent novel, *Lost River: Four Albums*, is no exception. Nearing the end of a terminal illness, Ruth Joiner opens the narrative with a question, ‘How does a mother tell her child she might die soon?’ (1). How will her young daughter, Dewi, ‘live on’? Ruth’s journey to death suggests a way of being in the world that, in his last interview before his death, Jacques Derrida has called, ‘*sur-vie*,’ a living that demands not just surviving, but

an unconditional affirmation of life. This surviving is life beyond life, life more than life, and my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death, because survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible. (‘Interview’ 52)

I turn to the concept of the archive to explore how such an ‘affirmation’ in death takes place in ‘discourse’ that is decidedly not death-oriented. I consider how Lazaroo’s novel grapples with what it might mean to live this ‘*most intense life possible*’ even as life itself is ceasing. I will demonstrate, with Derrida, that memory and ‘archive fever’ are at the heart of this struggle.

### **What Is the Archive? What Does It Do?**

The word ‘archive’ is related to the Greek ‘*arkhē*,’ which Derrida glosses in *Archive Fever* as both ‘to commence’ and ‘to command.’ That is, the archive *commences* ‘there’ in the ‘originary’ ontological place where the one who has the power can decide, indeed, can command what gets to be remembered (*Archive* 1). The related Greek word ‘*arkheion*’ further exemplifies this relation to power by signifying the domicile of actual magistrates and the place where documents were physically stored (*Archive* 2). This site of shelter marks the shift between private and public not least because the traffic between *anamnesis* (remembering) and *amnesis* (forgetting) will render the archive always incomplete: both by design (the principles of storage also determine what will *not* be saved), and by accident (what falls out in the process). Derrida identifies two functions inherent in these archival principles: conservation and institution. The archive *conserves* memory according to principles that *institute* the archive in the first place. Thus, the archive not only preserves and protects what *was*, it enacts a kind of staging, to produce as well as store memory. Crucially, Derrida argues, the ‘institutive’ function cannot be separated from the ‘conservative’ (*Archive* 7).

Derrida identifies a third function of the archive, that of ‘consignation.’ While he does not investigate what he calls the ‘ordinary sense’ of this word (*Archive 3*), I would like to consider it briefly here. *Consignation* derives from the Latin verb, *consignare*, to put one’s seal on, to sign, to document, while the noun, *consignation*, signifies documental proof, clearly reflecting the authority to demarcate what is significant enough to save, the authorising act that begins the archiving. Translation may be problematic, but in this instance, Derrida uses the same word in French which the translator retains in this more obsolete form of English as opposed to the modern, *consignment*. Perhaps in *consignation*, there is less of the commercial ‘transaction’ that *consignment* seems to connote in English, although it is not entirely absent. Certainly, *consignation* is a kind of exchange or transfer between at least two parties; in the case of *Lost River*, between mother and daughter, a point to which I will return in the next section. Derrida explains *consignation* as *consigning* ‘through *gathering together signs*’ (*Archive 3*). Furthermore, to *consign* is to ‘coordinate a single corpus . . . in which all the elements [gathered together] articulate the unit of an ideal configuration’ (*Archive 3*). Indeed, *consignation* begins by presupposing it is possible to ‘coordinate a single corpus’; it should not divide but avoid any heterogeneity or ‘secret’ that would separate or ‘partition’ the archive (*Archive 3*). Ostensibly, then, the archival process is about selecting and organising layers, or ‘substrates,’ with an intention to unify rather than complicate significance. At the same time, this ‘ideal configuration’ will always fall short of the homogeneity it desires.

In *Archive Fever*, the translated word, ‘substrate,’ is one that Derrida returns to repeatedly (thirty-five times), not the least because it also signifies a surface from which an organism begins and grows. Commentators critique Derrida for overly investing in the archive as a physical place in this digital age (Evans), but for Derrida, the archive does depend on the possibility of ‘accumulation and capitalisation of memory on some substrate’ in ‘an exterior place’ (*Archive 12*). Indeed, he writes that it is the ‘*external place*’ that ‘assures the possibility of repetition, of memorization’ (*Archive 11*). Repetition is clearly a mnemonic device, but what does Derrida mean by the ‘capitalisation of memory’? In both French and English, in committing something to another person’s charge or safekeeping, *consignation* directs attention to the archive’s commitment to the future. Indeed, Derrida writes that what ‘is at issue is nothing less than the future’ (*Archive 14*) because the archive operates as both a ‘pledge’ and a ‘wager.’ As a pledge, it is ‘a token of the future’ (*Archive 18*) in its promise to save what is important. Thus, motivated by the desire to preserve, the archive is also predicated on the *wager* that it will succeed: that what it consigns to the future, with the intention to ratify and pass on, will benefit that future. The consigned thus exists because of the very possibility of forgetfulness, because this *consignation* ‘takes place at the place of origin and the structural breakdown’ of memory (*Archive 11*). Basically, the archive is characterised by the ‘toil’ to identify, learn, and consolidate from traces precisely because of its investment in the future. It promises to put into storage according to principles not only related to the past, to what happened, to whom, when and why, but also according to predictions about what the future will require. Whether or not the *wager* ‘pays off’ in and for the future, whether it can be ‘capitalised’ upon, depends upon the ‘gathering’ of the consigned.

I would stress, as well, the archive’s *wager* crucially depends on the scene of reading. That is, this place, this substrate of consigned memory, is also a hermeneutic site, provoking and

producing scenes of reading. What occurs in the archive, as in any reading, results from the process of subjects reading: both the archivist interpreting ‘gathering,’ interpreting and re-interpreting and the recipient of the future also constructing meaning. Thus, the archive ‘produces as much as it records’ (*Archive* 17) based on what Derrida has called the ‘retrospective logic of a future perfect’ (*Archive* 9), for example, ‘I will have preserved the memories.’ Here the future perfect of the verb ‘to have’ (‘will have’) conjoins with the past participle (‘preserved’) in the moment of enunciation to form a neat conjunction of past, present and future.

### ***Lost River’s* ‘Four Albums’ as Archive**

Hitherto my discussion of the archive has reflected how regimes of power sustain dominant cultural narratives, particularly those that emanate from history’s winners: those who document and justify the events that produced the circumstances of dominance and control. Indeed, since the 1970s at least, scholars have critiqued the archive for storing mainly the products of privileged subjectivities, the expert connected to the context of power, creator-centric, making decisions about ‘value.’ Resistant approaches evaluate the archive not as a site of perceived neutrality, but as a locus of prohibitions that inevitably defers to elites (Gauld 229). However, I argue that these observations do not precisely hold for *Lost River*, a narrative in which a poor Eurasian woman takes four discarded photograph albums from a charity shop in order to create a scrappy collection of memories for her young daughter, Dewi, precisely to help her ‘live on’ after her mother’s death. Indeed, Ruth represents a domain of least privileged subjectivity and power in the novel.

More recent scholars have attempted to rehabilitate the concept of the archive, to open out the ways it may operate as a generative rather than purely repressive space. For example, in their research on community archives, Michelle Caswell et al. have found that the archive can also be a mobilising space, a physical site of memory that can ‘generate a profound sense of belonging’ (74). After extensive interaction with users in community archives, Caswell et al. concluded that concretising (consigning) a memory was a significant factor in building and sustaining belonging for people not formally represented or even recognised in a community. As one participant said, ‘You don’t see [people like] me in the books. ... My history doesn’t come from the books of [my town]. My history comes from talking to people like this’ (84). Indeed, researchers discovered that for these users, the most prevalent metaphor for the community archive was ‘home.’ In short, the archive does not only support dominant narratives, the oppressive discursive regimes, but can also help to elicit repressed or elided narratives. I would like to explore how transferring these outcomes from the community to a domestic archive can also help to collapse distance in contradistinction to all the ways the individual is otherwise constructed by the more ‘official’ archival mechanisms (data-driven bureaucratic, etc.). The result is to unsettle, if not overturn, official versions woven for individuals such as Ruth and Dewi in *Lost River*. In other words, although the archive may bear the imprint of the officious, we need not restrict identity to the one that institutional devices weave for us. As Jeffrey Wallen has observed, an archive may also revivify the ‘immediacy of an individual’s experience’; the domestic or the ‘I witness’ archive can begin to ‘draw out these complicated dynamics of memory’ and ‘re-frame them’ (265).

What can Ruth Joiner, the Eurasian protagonist in *Lost River* and one of the least privileged individuals in her community, hope to accomplish with her archive? No one in the town of Lost River ‘looks more out of place than Ruth Joiner’ (1). She is the daughter of a Balinese teenager

and an unknown Australian tourist. Her Australian adoptive parents deliberately ‘forget’ Ruth’s Balinese name before they leave the orphanage with ‘their’ baby because they say it is too hard to remember (87). We might call this the first annihilation, a void that underpins any sense of identity Ruth may hope to develop. The Joiners immediately transport Ruth to Australia and raise her on an evangelical mission for Aboriginal children in the far north of Western Australia. As a consequence, she possesses nothing of her own; all ‘goods,’ communal or personal, are donated by charity; Ruth and the Aboriginal children consider these objects as nothing more than detritus, exacerbating their sense that they lack any entitlement. At seventeen, Ruth decides there must be a better life ‘much further along the road’ (93), and absconds, wearing cast-off men’s clothing and pocketing forty-two dollars and twenty cents from the Mission donation jar. This marks the beginning of her ‘borrowing’ small items she hopes will fill a void. Just over ten years later, when the novel opens, she faces her own mortality without having accumulated much more in terms of worldly goods. Perhaps the most poignant of questions is not so much where she finds the authority to begin her archive, but how she finds the courage in the first place.

I understand this novel as a form of *hypomnesis*, a concept appearing first in Plato’s *Phaedrus* to distinguish between the oral and written forms of remembering (Plato). More recently, *hypomnesis* has come to signify the wider act of turning memory into something concrete, a product emerging from the process of remembering and memorialising, as in Holocaust memorials. Jeffrey Wallen has noted that in *Archive Fever*, Derrida conceives of ‘*hypomnesis*’ in contradistinction to ‘*anamnesis*,’ but argues that the ‘*rhetorical force*’ of Derrida’s writing gives ‘*value to that which has previously been marginalized*’ (263). *Lost River*’s preamble announces the marginalised Eurasian woman’s decision to use four discarded photograph albums as ‘*Somewhere to store all those memories for Dewi*’; the novel then follows a nonlinear structure where each of the four albums investigates the origins and meaning of Dewi’s life from her conception until her mother’s final moments. Each chapter begins with mother and daughter discussing (in present tense) a significant photo of life in the Lost River community in the southwest of Western Australia: neighbours, family, and most importantly, Dewi, Ruth, and the missing father, David. The bulk of each chapter then narrates (in past tense) the circumstances of the image, lingering affectively on intense moments, feelings, and images, while interpreting potential meanings in each case. The chapter is then capped by a brief return to the present (and present tense) as Ruth inscribes the page in the album with a relevant quotation from the *Oriental Wisdom 1976 Pocket Diary*, another cast-off object she takes from donations at the Lost River Opportunity Shop where she works throughout the novel. Ruth’s archive, in effect the novel, combines both documents *and* oral testimony between mother and child. It also reflects Mischa Twitchin’s point that *hypomnesis* creates a ‘*specific mode of exteriority*’ of experience which ‘*asks to be read*’ (137), confirming the hermeneutic aspect of its production and use.

The narrative thus works as a kind of substrated *hypomnesis*. Ruth does not construct her archive, the albums, for her daughter to read in any set order (as the reader does). In creating four ‘*substrates*,’ Dewi will be able to quarry and build her own version of the truth, what is real for her and worth remembering, to create her own sense of her life’s substrates. ‘*Data*’ is stored according to the colour of the albums, a loose classification to be sure, moving from the grey album of black and white photos, through two technicolour albums, to the final white album characterised by the fever and light that ends the narrative. Unlike the more centripetal, official archive, Ruth’s version recognises that so much depends on the unknown and that much will

remain undetermined by the end of the process. Indeed, even before Ruth dies, the albums themselves are already disintegrating as the cheap glue does not hold. In other words, Ruth's archive eschews any 'will to know all,' to produce the definitive history of her small family. As the arbiter of memory, who performs the selective function, she is a kind of guarantor of provenance, validating for Dewi not the impeccable truth about events in Dewi's life but rather the intensity of memory of certain moments in the past. In short, both Ruth and Dewi engage in the hermeneutic process of interpreting the past, but in ways that, at least in part, suggest that the mother and daughter will operate as spectres to each other: Ruth speaks to and makes choices based on a Dewi of the future she will not know, while Dewi will interact (inevitably, soon) in the archival space with the spectre of Ruth who has passed away.

This future orientation is the archive's promissory effect, indicating that what is *owed* is both a promise and a debt (Foster 5). The novel thus begins at the point of impending death, when Ruth decides to commence an archive of photographs and borrowed wisdom to sustain her child after she passes. The albums set out to explain how she creates a 'home' with cast-offs in a dilapidated, borrowed cottage, full of rising, falling and lateral damp. We learn early in the first album that Dewi's father had offered Ruth what she understands as the first moment of actual hospitality in her life, when he says, 'C'n stay' until 'you find yer feet. Won't cost you anything. . . . Make yourself at home' (19–20). Perhaps what interests me most about the novel is how the archival process comes to delineate *dwelling*, particularly since the original host, David, disappears a day after Dewi is conceived and is never seen again alive. The albums thus consign and domicile both memory and her interpretation of those memories, representing an exceptional act of self-authorising, given Ruth's situation. Thus, the archival process itself could be considered the work of building Heidegger's dwelling.

### **The Archive as Dwelling in *Lost River***

As I note above, Caswell's research team found that 'home' is a 'significant metaphor in the literature about archives, . . . particularly in gender and postcolonial studies' (75). Joanna Latimer and Rolland Munro engage with Martin Heidegger's ideas of dwelling and home to argue that what people "'keep" affects their experience of dwelling,' and helps to constitute and reproduce worlds 'that bind' (317). The four albums do provide a 'history' of how authorities in the novel (official archives associated with school, the government) constrain subjectivities such as Ruth's and Dewi's. However, at the same time, the albums offer a *counter-history* comprising moments that tell a different story about binding love, home, and belonging. Throughout her time in *Lost River*, Ruth helps herself to objects from the charity shelves, including items to augment the shack's accoutrements of home. She also saves the photographs she discovers, taken by Dewi's father, and repairs them when the river floods the cottage on occasion. As 'archivist,' Ruth decides what to 'consign,' what is meaningful, worth keeping, and it is always linked to memory. 'Please don't throw them away,' she begs David's brother, after David's things are damaged in the flood. 'They'll help me remember him' (38). She recognises that she and the 'shy man she knew for only a few weeks have struggled for visibility' (39). Significantly, David is also Eurasian, from a Filipina mother and an Australian father. After David goes missing, she is the only Asian inhabitant of *Lost River* (45).

To put it another way, as a teenage single mother of colour, Ruth is low in ‘family capital,’ a concept Goodsell and Seiter define as a form of ‘cultural capital’ related to ‘belonging to a social group legitimated as a “family” (credential)’ which involves ‘having competence in acting in a way consistent with that type of family’ (321). Parents ‘pass this form of capital to their children’ as an advantage when ‘the particular family type’ is deemed normal (321). The goal is to capitalise on memory to create a familial ‘habitus that will be of use for the children’; indeed, the process of collecting products of family capital will operate as ‘frames in relation to the children’ (323). Clearly, little about Ruth’s ‘family’ presents as normative to the mainly white, self-designated ‘alternative’ life-stylers who populate the expanding resort town of Lost River. Goodsell and Seiter draw on Bourdieu for their understanding of ‘habitus,’ and, as Mark Mallman points out, critics have charged Bourdieu with being ‘overly deterministic’ when he conceives habitus as the ‘complex schema of psychic and embodied social disposition, derived from material circumstances and socialising influences’ that are generally marked by failure for the upwardly mobile (19–20). However, Mallman also demonstrates that ‘qualitative research’ proves that the ‘habitus *is* amenable to change or alteration’ (emphasis in original, 20). Operating from the bottom, as a mother intimately familiar with the precarity of home, Ruth designs her archive to demonstrate how dwelling, if you get it ‘right,’ may lead to a sense of belonging, happiness, and home. She refuses to accept that she is unable to build her own family capital. Nearing death, she contemplates the last page of her second album, the blue one, describing an obliterated proof sheet of damaged images of her young daughter running along the riverbank, ‘radiant’ with ‘the light and wind streaming through her hair’ (187). She decides to save this sheet because it is proof of moments that

[d]espite the relentlessness of her life’s passing, despite the disintegration of the cottage and her body, despite everything, there were moments like this when a kind of grace descended on their precarious home. . . . Here, Dewi and she are beyond the reach of illness and death. (188)

At this point, images begin to disappear for Ruth; hallucinations and dreams overtake waking and sleeping. Indeed, this might be the point where she is engulfed with ‘archive fever,’ but the novel’s archival structure is sustained. Inside the third album, the green one, Ruth’s world ‘take[s] on an intense clarity’ (196) as her corporeal functions disintegrate to the point of collapse. Dwelling well and ‘living on’ become a matter of recognising precisely ‘all those moments’ that mother and daughter ‘made for each other’ (200).

The photographs that Ruth archives are usually the imperfect images that nevertheless resonate intensely and reflect the ‘wisdom’ Ruth wishes to impart. Perhaps most poignant is the only photograph of Ruth and David together, an image Dewi finds ‘kinda scary’ since both mother and father are out of focus; ‘the blurring makes [the couple’s eyes] look like big holes cut out of paper.’ To Dewi, there is ‘[s]omething thinner than skin’ about them (206). In a sense, they are already both spectres. David had been running to reach Ruth ‘in time’ for the shutter to click, but not in time for either to be seen clearly (207). It remains an ‘impossible shot’ (211): whether the young man and woman are beginning to appear or disappear is indeterminable. Perhaps the principle that guides this archival project is the wisdom to recognise, as she writes in the final (white) album, that ‘homes, photographs, stories’ are ‘all memorials we make to help us find our way back to love after loss’ (283). In her final annotations, Ruth advises Dewi to find

ways of dealing with grief. Loving people, creatures, wilderness; or making a home, a garden, pictures, any of these can help us find our way again. If we don't keep loving and making, all we're left with is a sense of loss and time passing. (290)

This passage resonates for me with Heidegger's work, particularly his essay, 'Building Dwelling Thinking' where he writes:

to be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* in so far as he *dwells*, this word *bauen* however *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care—it tends the growth that ripens into its fruit of its own accord. (145)

Here Heidegger stresses that the 'work' of dwelling is 'cultivating' (145). It creates what Dominic Griffiths has called the 'sedimentation of an emotional and psychological attachment' to a place since to dwell is to be 'at home, somewhere,' or 'grounded in place' (7). The word sedimentation links the making of home with the making of archives, where the substrates may be formed in opposition to erosion, forming a collected layer. Griffiths further argues that 'to consider a place as "home" requires thinking about oneself as *belonging* there' (my emphasis 7). The work of dwelling thus binds one to a place, but as Thomas Rickert points out in his discussion of 'ambient environs,' dwelling is more than an 'attunement' to a place; in fact, we must 'know together' (222–23). Indeed, the relations in dwelling that sustain us, as Ruth implies in her messages to her daughter, are both discursive and material. To this point, then, the narratives and the objects that shape our relations, such as Ruth's albums, orient us both to place and to others. Richert argues that these things make claims on us as we make the world with others (229).

The architect Jonas Holst elaborates Heidegger's concept of dwelling by extending Heidegger's etymological thinking on the Germanic term, 'bauen' (build), to form a 'richer picture of what it means to dwell' (n. p.). This move is after all in line with Heidegger's own method since he often began his work by pointing towards the long-forgotten meaning of a word (Greaves 1). Holst argues that 'to dwell' originates from the Old English, 'dwellan,' which means 'to stray from a path,' modified in meaning from the Old Norse 'dvelja,' to abide (n. p.). He points out the irony of the present meaning's origin in the dynamic act of 'straying' but emphasises that dwelling does not suggest an established living place or structure, but rather the process of 'making a halt and lingering on a path in doubts about where to go' (n. p.). For Holst, a 'pause' stands at the beginning of dwelling in order to 'dväle'—in 'Nordic countries,' to take time and give 'full attention to something' (n. p.). For architecture, this means creating 'well-being' by creating spaces where 'people can feel rooted to the earth' and flourish (n. p.). Dwelling thus entails more than surviving. I would add that the things which 'bind' don't just affect dwelling, they catalyse it (Rose 759). More than a place to store memories, Ruth's archives actualise her sense of dwelling.

Hal Foster has observed that while artists may 'strain' the idea of the archive, archival art is 'rarely cynical in intent' (6). As a work of art itself and one that strains the idea of the archive, it is not surprising that *Lost River: Four Albums* may have more in common with the artist than the

historian or genealogist. In a sense, the novel's future-oriented promises are reflected in its final image where Dewi releases Ruth's ashes which 'eddy on the breeze . . . before falling towards the river' (294), signifying the trace of a mother who 'found herself by finding the value in unwanted people and things' (294). This process, I would argue, demonstrates that the kind of 'taking care' Heidegger privileges in his writing on dwelling may also achieve Derrida's challenge to live '*the most intense life possible.*' *Archive Fever's* concluding image of ashes also provokes Cathy Carruth's question in *Literature in the Ashes of History*: 'To burn with archive fever: Does it mean to bear witness or to be ash?' (87). The answer is obviously both, as one races, *as Ruth races*, against the moment of becoming-ash, becoming what will, and will not be, known.

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