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## Archives of Environmental Apocalypse in Sarah Moss's *Cold Earth*: Archaeology, Viruses, and Melancholia

"Memory does not only bear on time: it requires  
time—a time of mourning."

Paul Ricœur (*Memory, History, Forgetting*)

Sarah Moss's novels generally engage with traumatic neurosis and ambiguous situations. They also portray inhospitable Arctic or Northern scenery populated by ghosts, with remnants of ancient civilizations. This wild and sublime landscape impinges on Moss's narratives with a melancholic force that brings the sufferings of the past to the textual surface. If loss and environmental changes are registered in the landscape, the very act of narrating reflects a similar archival operation in the attempt to gather the fragments of human memory. Both landscape and writing act as productive spaces of interpretation, oscillating "between voicing and silencing, past and becoming, singular and collective, oblivion and focalization" (Ulloa, Weisman and Shemtov). In other words, Moss's fiction contributes to a poetics of the archive understood as a way to record and compensate for human loss and ecological apocalypse.

In Moss's debut novel, *Cold Earth* (2009), the evocative depiction of the Arctic clearly manifests this idea of the northern landscape as an

archive of traumatic loss and environmental disasters. Moss's *opera prima* is set along the North-West coast of Greenland where six archaeologists are digging the remains of a medieval Norse settlement, while an airborne virus is spreading worldwide.<sup>1</sup> *Cold Earth* then juxtaposes the archaeologists' excavation campaign with an impending ecological decay: by presenting a gothic environment apparently haunted by ghosts and eerie sounds, the novel interweaves environmental mayhem and human fragility with apocalyptic imagination and traumatic experiences. As the narrative progresses, the harsh climate of the Arctic, the breakdown of the only satellite phone, the looming menace of the viral outbreak, the lack of communication with the world outside Greenland, and the growing sense of anxiety among the archaeologists contribute to the thrilling climax of the tale.

In *Cold Earth*, the Arctic is associated with images of mourning and burial sites (individual and mass graves, like burial pits and cairns<sup>2</sup>), while "plants were withering and dying [...] as the birds and animals went away" (*Cold Earth* 184). In formal terms, the novel is structured into seven chapters, with the six archaeologists—Nina, Ruth, Catriona, Jim, Ben, and Yianni—taking turns in narrating the story in letter forms addressed to their loved ones. These fragmented perspectives record the traumas that torment the characters, juxtaposing the limits of their endurance in the North Pole with their personal past traumas. Though Nina's viewpoint is dominant, inasmuch as her narrative perspective opens and closes the novel, covering about one third of the tale, the presence of multiple narrators interrupts the plotline by incorporating different viewpoints on the events narrated. This multifocal perspective creates tension and, with its elegiac orientation, the narrative manifests a sense of fragmentation that leaves readers with a continuous feeling of suspense. These unfiltered choral first-person viewpoints provide readers with limited knowledge of the events, challenging their ability to decipher the disarrayed temporality. Interestingly, the most striking feature of the novel lies not in the apocalypse it unleashes, but in the upheaval of time. Endless moments of despair disrupt the chronological order, in the awareness that "the world will end" (189) owing to the viral outbreak that is threatening human life. Going back and forth along the temporal axis, *Cold Earth* connects the mass epidemics (65) and the advent of the Ice Age (66) in the fourteenth century with the major threats posed by the deadly-flu virus and present global warming.

*Cold Earth* is then concerned with the dread of obliteration and the yearning for recovering time. The temporal frame of the novel seems to be indebted to Jacques Derrida's poetics of the archive and to the figure of the ghost understood as that which is neither present nor absent,

thereby pointing to it as a disturbing mechanism that gives voices to the past or “to the not yet formulated possibilities of the future” (Davis 379). On the one hand, a need to record and remember seems to animate both the landscape and human memory by means of such elegiac strategies as the use of the “I” and “we” that create a dialogic relationship where a sense of collective loss emerges. On the other hand, the temporal perspective occupied by narrators of a would-be end-of-the-world apocalypse suggests a mode of projecting the future. Ghostly apparitions disrupt the linear flow of time and, in Derrida’s words, embody a “spectral moment” that “no longer belongs to time” (*Spectres of Marx* xix).

Moss’s novel can then be examined from the critical intersection of archive, melancholia and environmental apocalypse. With its focus on archaeology and narrative archiving on the one hand and natural disasters on the other, the novel can be said to favor a view of the archive understood as both a “physical” and an “imaginative” site, a “conceptual space whose boundaries are forever changing” (Voss and Werner 1), where the historical and the personal are inextricably intertwined. In *Cold Earth*, the archaeological investigation works as a way of “reading, earth rather than text” (65), thus foregrounding a semantic configuration in the landscape. As such, the soil manifests as “storied matter” where “reality is read as a material text, a site of narrativity” (Iovino 57–58; emphasis in the original). Also, the Arctic environment is haunted by personal traumas that return as revenants to obsess the characters. As a consequence, the choral narrative flow not only highlights the isolation of the six characters but also becomes an archival elegiac site which ultimately allows subjectivities to find their existential significance while narrating. Following the so-called archival turn in literary studies (Manoff; Sheringam), *Cold Earth* can be said to materialize “a site of processing rather than preservation” (Chadwick and Vermeulen 4). As the letters contained in the novel register the traumatic experiences of the characters, thereby anticipating the unpromising future where the virus significantly impacts on human life, so the landscape and its geological time-scale contain the traces of the past, connecting them with present-day environmental decay. Thus, both landscape and narrating, as Paul Ricœur would put it, mediate memory, presenting “a selective dimension” (448) where remembering and forgetting overlap.

This article explores how archaeological excavation, environmental apocalypse, temporal disarray, and memory frictions function as archiving vehicles in *Cold Earth*. A central concern of the article is how both the environment and human subjectivity are very much alike in their archiving nature: they offer the reader a response to loss,

preserving past memory, and in doing this, they melancholically internalize such losses in a Freudian sense, becoming themselves archives. First, it is contended that the archaeological motif in *Cold Earth* functions as an archive, tying it to the generic mode of the elegy. Scenes of lamentation pervade the narrative, infiltrating its form. Gaps, silences, repetitions and hesitations make the past present, while ghosts and hallucinations reveal a fascination with the conflict between the desire to remember and the need to work through the past. Then, it is suggested that the obsession with the archiving metaphor conveys a disjointed temporality where the preservation of the past is juxtaposed to the imagination of the future, revealing the proleptic power of the archive. This leads to the question of writing as archiving, enabling subjectivities to find a sense of the self while narrating. Finally, it is discussed how apocalyptic archives entail a post-melancholic nature, possibly hinting at a recovery of the materiality of life in the aftermath of the apocalypse.

### Archaeology as Archiving: Elegy and Ghosts

The archive shares with storytelling an elegiac and nostalgic dimension in that they both tend to store memory, becoming sites of devotion to the past. In his seminal work, Derrida coined the expression *mal d'archive* to describe the accumulation and preservation of the traces of the past. By commenting on Sigmund Freud's fascination with Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva* (1893),<sup>3</sup> Derrida interpreted Freud's analysis of the novella as an emblem of the "archive fever." Jensen's tale revolves around a German archaeologist, Norbert Hanold, whose obsessive quest can be read, in Freud's words, as "a hallucination or a mid-day ghost" ("Delusions and Dreams" 43). For Freud, the woman whom Hanold accidentally meets in Pompeii figuratively encompasses his own recollections of the past. This interlacing of different temporal dimensions becomes even more evident when Freud views Hanold's archaeological activity as a metaphor for psychological investigation. Like the material ruins of Pompeii are the layers of the past coming to the surface, so psychoanalysis unearths the unconscious, digging into the fractures of the self. For Derrida, Hanold is victim of an archiving fever governed by annihilation and destruction. The structure of the archive is spectral and the allegedly "impossible archaeology" (*Archive Fever* 85) of nostalgic yearning can explain why the past never passes since the archive "takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of said memory" (11). Not only is the archive linked to the past, its temporal frame "also determines the structure of the *archiveable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the

future" (16; emphasis in the original). This means that the archive is not closed and is also marked by an openness to the future; rather, it is the possibility of reinterpreting the past in the future that contributes to the emergence of the spectrality of the archive.

In *Cold Earth*, the engagement with loss and lamentation presents the reader with a strong sense of anxiety and uncertainty which implies a certain conformity to the generic template of the elegy. As indicated by David Kennedy (2007), elegy is a form "without frontiers" (1) and if novels can be approached as elegies this suggests that not only can loss be ascribed to death as in traditional poetic elegies, it is also "inextricable from our general experience" (2) of life. Seen in this light, *Cold Earth* is characterized by an elegiac language of grieving and loss that affects both the characters and the narrative form. The archaeologists are in the throes of terrible personal, psychological, and environmental situations that make them wounded subjects. In their testimonial accounts, addressed to their loved ones, gaps, contradictions, and hesitations convey a vulnerable form where echoes and repetitions of the past disrupt the linear flow of time, providing an evocation of spectrality that ultimately hints at the inherent destructive side of the archive where grieving seems to prevail. "When the end comes," says Jim while addressing his family, "I want you guys to know that [...] I loved you all" (*Cold Earth* 252). Cold and hunger torment the archaeologists, whose traumatic experiences are juxtaposed to the Norse Greenlanders' extinction. In Jim's words, love and oblivion alternate: his reliance on the elegiac imagery of death is premised on the verge of a mental breakdown that amplifies memory conflicts. The tension between remembering and forgetting in Jim's thoughts—"I was trying not to think about home," "I don't remember Mom making my quilt," "I tried to think about the Greenlanders in their big house up the hill" (249)—is evocative of the temporal limbo of the narrative. In such instances, elegiac language is the expression of how partial amnesia and glimpses into the past disclose some forms of structural friction.

This elegiac inspiration is also made manifest in the Arctic landscape where life and death viscerally coexist. Moss employs the gelid soil as an archiving structure where ancient settlements are buried and, like in Jensen's depiction of the remains in Pompeii, the novel presents archaeological digging as both a mental and physical tunneling process. The Northern landscape, "the real Arctic" (184) as Jim calls it, "died and turned white" (184). While the place is profoundly imbricated in the preservation of the traces of the past, it is also represented as one of "wilderness and unspoilt scenery" (104), the images it offers

to the archaeologists, as well as to the readers, of beauty and extreme desolation.

Moss portrays the archaeological excavation along the western coast of Greenland where a medieval Norse farmstead used to be thriving in the fourteenth century. Here, the Norse Greenlanders used to bury corpses on the farm and “left a hole for the priest to pour water and consecrate the grave” (*Cold Earth* 91). The frozen ground acts as a metaphoric element for the sedimentation of memory, bearing witness to the departed. Again, this material reading of the landscape provides an ethical frame in which “ethical meanings become recognizable as part of a complex of material and discursive elements” (Iovino 64). Also, the wounds in the Arctic ground give way to more recent catastrophes. The graves, for instance, can testify to the archaeologists’ fears of dying and to the impending catastrophe of the contagion that is killing the world population. The protagonists of Moss’s tale are then confronted with an inhospitable environment where the experience of the polar night, with “a grey light [that] cracked the horizon” (*Cold Earth* 115), contributes to the emergence of spectral apparitions, thus recalling the conventions of ghost texts. The ghost, as Jean-Michel Ganteau argues, is the main figure of the elegy in that it connects the living with the dead, and, in so doing, ghosts materialize a condition of vulnerability by instilling “a state of immanent crisis that holds contemporary society in its grip” (107). Derrida claims that the logic of the ghost interrupts the linearity of time, since it “points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic” (*Spectres of Marx* 78). In this respect, ghosts are emblems of the archive, entailing what Derrida calls “an irreducible experience for the future” (*Archive Fever* 68).

Like “faint shadows” (*Cold Earth* 122) that roam Greenland, ghost-like apparitions torment the archaeologists, specifically Nina who is haunted by nightmares of a Norse family burned alive and by images of violent slaughters. The young woman, who is not a professional archaeologist but a postdoctoral researcher investigating the influence of Nordic sagas on nineteenth-century British literature, gradually withdraws from the excavation claiming that the ghost of a Norseman is spoiling the project. She is finally perceived as a “spectral presence” (122) by her colleagues, losing popularity among them. Thus, ghosts interrupt the chronological flow of time or, as Ganteau argues, “the temporality of the ghost narrative is clearly thrown out of joint” (128). Vacillating between presence and absence, ghost texts push the temporal boundaries to the limit by redirecting the voices of the past and by disclosing the possibilities of a not yet formulated future. However, ghosts also work as relational elements, showing how the subject is

always “dependent on others, either the living or the dead” (Ganteau 115).

Crucially, the semantic accumulation embedded in the landscape turn the Arctic into a gothic location where personal traumas and historical catastrophes overlap. The burial site contains the signs of victims of ritual sacrifices, plague and violent deaths. Their presence becomes a living sign that finds its counterpart in similarly traumatic images of the present. Ruth, for instance, is grieving the loss of her boyfriend James. She thereby views archaeology as a compensative strategy to merge the traces of a distant past, the eclipse of the Norse civilization in Greenland, with her present mourning. While digging in the burial pits, Ruth finds a skeleton whose remaining parts recall James’s burnt body in the aftermath of his deadly accident. By brushing the hands, the arms, and the skull of the Norse skeleton, Ruth indirectly summons up James’s body parts. James’s hair, burnt after the accident, returns in the image of the bald skull. In taking care of a vulnerable body, Ruth is hence unable to mourn James. On the contrary, she establishes melancholic connections between the Norse skeleton and James’s corpse: in her mind, James’s face “emerged from the ground [...] nestled in what had once been a brain, a brain that made ideas and words” (*Cold Earth* 129). Thus, Ruth transforms this hidden site of death into an evocative place of suffering. Moreover, the excavations bring to light mental representations of corpses “missing both ends, bones severed cleanly [...] jawbone sliced off and a cut mark in the collar bone” (179) and these brutal images suggest the force of the landscape to register and remember pain. The grinning teeth of the skeleton remind Ruth that “death kills” (129) and what remains is only memory belonging to those who survive. The theme of survival, that for Kennedy is a main tenet of the elegy, is a sort of “privilege” (Kennedy 121) in that it allows mourners to share their testimony, making an absence visible. And yet, not only does memory entail the return of the past, it also elicits a pledge to oneself. While lamenting loss, the survivor also lays emphasis on the ethical meaning of the archive, shedding light on what is left of one’s life. The conflict between past and future is a hallmark of the archive in which new memories can change, transform and illuminate the nature of the past.

The archaeological metaphor, therefore, reflects the Derridean project of the archive as a site where the fragments of the past are preserved and future events are foreshadowed. In Derrida’s view, the archive can predict the future since it “has always been a pledge and like every pledge, a token of the future” (*Archive Fever* 18). The archive opens up to a spectral future that can either work through or act out the traumatic legacies of the past. For Ruth, the interconnectedness of

archaeology and memory produces a coalescence of past, present, and future. In this light, the resurrection of the Norse skeleton unfolds in a crescendo of recollections which create a powerful effect of elegiac lamentation. Whereas the past cannot be restored and the dead are unable to return to life, their remembrance can be registered through mnemonic investments. Thus, *Cold Earth* shares an interest with Derrida's vision of the archive as being "spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent 'in the flesh', neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes cannot be met" (84; emphasis in the original). The archive defies presence and absence at the same time, and what is intrinsic in its genesis is the possibility of apocalypse and destruction. A feeling of loss haunts Ruth and the other characters of the novel, establishing melancholic attachments to the loved ones: as Freud notoriously contended, the melancholic tends to "incorporate" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 250) the object of loss and, in so doing, Ruth's grief evokes this idea of the archive as a spectral entity. As in Hanold's romantic quest among the Roman ruins, the past cannot similarly return in Ruth's Norse settlement, while the archive materializes the persistence of past desires and the anxiety for the upcoming future. Nevertheless, what seems to be a ghost story eventually turns into apocalyptic eco-fiction because of the airborne virus wreaking havoc worldwide.

### Archiving Environmental Apocalypse or Imagining the Future

The archaeological motif is then central to *Cold Earth*, revealing its nature as a site for the preservation and transmission of knowledge. Significantly, the search and retrieval of remains turns into a cultural quest in which archiving becomes a way for interpreting the past. The cold earth, with its burial pits, skulls, and graves, holds its painful memories, which become embedded in the very landscape. The idea that the non-human is "filled with agency" (Iovino 53) entails an imaginative vision of materiality that contributes to making the world intelligible. Ben, for instance, sees the Norse settlement as a liminal site, "on the edge of habitability" (*Cold Earth* 18). These villages used to be constructed and reconstructed according to short-term climatic variations and major epidemics. The reader learns that the farming techniques employed by the Norse Greenlanders "exhausted the land after a while" (43). However, a clear explanation of the end of the Norse civilization in Greenland cannot be offered. On the one hand, fishermen must have raided the Norse settlements. On the other, ecological mayhem might have been responsible for the eclipse of the Norse



Greenlanders. According to Yianni, the British-Greek leader of the excavation, the “mini Ice Age” (44) that affected the land in the fourteenth century hastened the erosion of the soil, causing a conflict between the Norse and the Inuit. Owing to the fall of temperatures by the mid of the century, Yianni claims that the Norse “must have seen the winters getting longer and harder” (109). Archaeology, instead, suggests other possibilities: in the burial pit the six archaeologists are digging, “there are signs of burning, which would seem to fuel the pirate-raid theory” (110). Moreover, mass epidemics, like the Black Death, contributed to the departure of the Norse from the Arctic region. The archival traces of the earth become then a conduit to the environmental dimension of the narrative. As Yianni points out, “[s]oil changes suggest organic remains” (91) and such material remains testify not only to a tragic and violent history. The semiotic materiality of the place triggers the question of our contemporary ecological crisis, moving the chronological axis of the novel from the deep past to the present and the future.

The specter of a global catastrophe looms large in *Cold Earth*, where life seems to be ending like in “a disaster movie with all the special effects” (185). As Andrew Tate suggests, catastrophic narratives are “characterized by a certain kind of *pre*-apocalyptic anxiety, narrated by figures who [...] believe themselves to be living in the last days” (7; emphasis in the original). On the verge of death and extinction, apocalyptic fiction depicts the broad destruction of natural habitats and social systems through the binary forces of climate change and uncontrolled capitalism. For Greg Garrard, apocalypse is also an “ecocritical trope” (94), a powerful metaphor for the ecological imagination in a time haunted by climatic change and environmental decay. Garrard argues that ‘environmental apocalypticism’ “is not about anticipating the end of the world, but about attempting to avert it by persuasive means” (107–108). From this perspective, literature serves as an ethical archive, holding strong implications for the connection between humanity and nature.

Though the rhetoric of apocalypse is only evoked, the motif of the virus gradually threatens the archaeologists, giving rise to speculations about the origin of the viral infection. While some characters are dismissive, seeing it as “a media panic” or “[e]asy journalism for August” (*Cold Earth* 22), others read the viral contagion in geopolitical terms because “Americans are going to say terrorists have spreading germs” (23) so as to declare war to their enemies. For Catriona, instead, “a proper pandemic might be quite good for the environment” as a way “of arresting climate change” (23). As these excerpts illustrate, while the origin of the infection stays in the background, fears and apprehensions prevail, showing how war, famine, and plague are always in the

offing. Whereas readers learn little about the viral breakdown, the virus, with its apocalyptic consequences, slowly becomes a vector for turning the world into a place where human survival is at stake. Jim, for instance, meditates upon the devastation caused by global warming: “I guess in another few decades we’ll be out of fuel for the central heating” (213). Jim’s lamentations become even more ominous when he compares the fate of the archaeologists to the extinction of the Norse Greenlanders, foreshadowing a world where death and desolation are diffused. If the archaeological survey maps the Arctic land as a site disclosing material traces, environmental apocalypse shifts the archival metaphor from the geological scale to the present and the future, fore-running the disastrous consequences of disease ecology and climate change.

*Cold Earth* depicts the Arctic as a palimpsest unearthing historical traces of human life while mankind is threatened with extinction. Like in a spiral temporal frame, climate changes and mass epidemics replicate themselves, suggesting future apocalypses. The ineluctability of pain and disaster impacts both retrospection and futurity, undermining the archival structure of the landscape: the menace of a “nuclear holocaust” (191) leaves no space for remainders of human life, thereby showing the havoc caused by both human violence and natural disasters. Nina views the end of the Norse life in Greenland as a further re-enactment of a similar collapse in Ireland by pirates, “the same landscape [...] only further up the same coast, geologically [...] the old ones watched the ships disappearing over the horizon and knew the future was gone” (216). Likewise, Catriona recalls the Ice Age during the fourteenth century, which possibly swept away the Norse, with their imminent death and starvation in the Arctic, “the apocalypse setting into Act II” (254). Something rather more sinister occurs when a series of catastrophic events are united in a long description: “[t]his is not the Middles Ages. Remember SARS? Remember the anthrax after 9/11? The bird flu scare? [...] It may even be just an excuse for war. Bet you anything the Americans announce that actually it’s another terrorist outrage. A sinister plague from the East” (92). Here, Ruth dismisses the idea of a global catastrophe, viewing the viral infection as business for magazines and newspapers. The apocalyptic events listed in this recollection showcase the negative impact of disease ecology since scientific, environmental, and political spheres overlap with the treat of the pandemic, a convergence confirmed by the COVID-19 outbreak that has recently plunged the globe into health and socio-economic turmoil. To a certain extent, *Cold Earth* addresses the very same imbrications of fears, social crisis, and emotional difficulties as in all times of pandemic.

The motif of the virus also connects environmental apocalypse to communication breakdown, thereby emphasizing a common sense of precariousness in man and nature. The emails the archaeologists receive from their relatives convey the growing force of the virus. By the time they reach the Arctic, some people have already been killed in the USA, and readers gradually learn that the viral infection is spreading towards Europe. The emails generate panic and desperation among the archaeologists who, paradoxically, are safer on the cold earth of Greenland than with their families. When a virtual virus disrupts Yianni's computer, where all the data of the excavation had been stored, the six archaeologists definitively lose contact with the world around them since their only satellite phone stops working. Like the Norse in medieval Greenland, so too have the archaeologists become isolated. Their lack of contact with the world shows how humans can be inherently vulnerable. This universal condition of fragility finds an echo even in the scarceness of words. This is suggested, for instance, by Jim's confession that they "have so little information here, a few words from a shepherd who doesn't speak English. I don't know if vast swathes of America are desolate, flapping doors, abandoned vehicles and rotting bodies" (185). In the above-mentioned extract, extinction takes the form of a symbolic erosion of language. The threat of human disappearance finds a coincidence in the gradual brevity of the letters by the last narrators of *Cold Earth*, a lexical dissolution that Ben clearly points out: "I am not sure there's too much to say" (268).

In *Cold Earth*, the desire to gather knowledge from the past becomes an emblem of the futurity of the archive. What is crucial is that the continuity into the future of plagues, climate changes, and human actions remorselessly affects the human mind as a vulnerable agent. Again, the disarrayed chronology of the novel suggests a link to the temporality of the archive that, as Derrida argues, is relentlessly futural: the archive is not only the place "for stocking and for conserving an archival content of the past" (*Archive Fever* 16). According to Derrida, "[a] spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise" (36). This proleptical orientation of the archive is manifested in Moss's novel in the portrayal of such a present devastated space that refers back to previous environmental apocalypse.

As Derrida's archive attends to the future, so ecological disasters push the events into an endless temporal frame in *Cold Earth*. The violence of trauma produces some alterations in the self, recalling Maurice Blanchot's "subjectivity without subject": "the wounded space, the hurt of dying" (30) generates a dispersion in the self, transforming human subjects into traces themselves of the archive. On the one hand,

the choral and fragmented narrative perspective aptly illustrates the theme of human extinction, in line with the tenets of the Anthropocene. The multifocal narrative viewpoint allows Moss to offer diverse human responses to climate change, showing how environmental apocalypticism has altered the horizon of human awareness. On the other, the uncertainties about a future world without human life results in active creations of human agency, as the letters by the narrators demonstrate. What does it mean to archive testimonies in the slippery times of the Anthropocene redolent “of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters [. . .]; of refusing to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away” (Haraway 35)? As Donna Haraway argues, our times of urgency demand new ways of thinking about our understanding of past, present, and future, viewing temporal shifts as entanglements of anticipation and retrospection: the past can anticipate future events and we can view this past retrospectively in the present. *Cold Earth* recasts this paradox: if archaeology discloses evidences of the past, writing also entails detaching from the past, serving as “forms of mediation in which to house such witnesses” (67) and allowing us to make sense of our future by filling in the gaps generated by traumas with mnemonic associations that contribute to move away from melancholic incorporations.

### Narrating as Archiving: Memory and Place

As the title suggests, *Cold Earth* is set against a chilly landscape, a remote and unpopulated valley where the six archaeologists seem to have escaped in order to work through their personal traumas. In his investigation into the convergence between landscape and memory, French historian Pierre Nora claims that a place can become a material archive, or *lieu de mémoire*, “only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura” (19).<sup>4</sup> According to Nora, while history entails “a representation of the past” (8), memory “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (8). Nora’s reading of the landscape relies on the interconnectedness between nature and culture as in an archive where personal memories and factual documents are juxtaposed. Memory places are then likely to be amnesiac: they need people to fill in their stratus and gather meaning.

In *Cold Earth*, the Northern landscape evokes Nora’s memory places, raising the question of whether a place so imbued with death can

paradoxically materialize a “will to remember” (Nora 8). Interestingly, the icy landscape of Greenland exemplifies a deep sense of isolation: it exhibits, as Catriona emphasizes, “the full Arctic extravaganza experience with special effects” (*Cold Earth* 260), the Northern light making the place a trans-human environment. For Catriona, the unfamiliarity of such an accustomed earth is so striking that joking about food supplies is like “a way of staying human” (260) before the prospect of starvation. This expression suggests a link between the harsh environment and the existential idea of disruption and fragmentation. By placing her characters in the gelid Northern excavation site, Moss offers a way to understand how coping with traumas can transform human subjects into archives themselves. The six archaeologists are all intradiegetic narrators who neither filter nor arrange events chronologically. They become archives in the same way as their narratives signal that loss can indelibly mark human mind. Rather, the narrators assemble facts, ideas, faces, emotions, and memoirs into a choral and fluid narrative frame through which readers eventually have to patch up the gaps in order to find the interpretative keys for getting to grips with the archaeologists’ shattered lives. As Ricœur claims, drawing on Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” when a traumatic event is stored in the memory, the subject experiences a break from the object of loss, remembering it as an event set in the past and not melancholically repeating it. “Memory does not only bear on time: it also requires time—a time of mourning” (74), Ricœur argues, thereby suggesting that memory is not only dependent on a spatial domain, as Nora indicates, but also on a temporal dimension where mourning emerges over melancholia.

*Cold Earth* offers a narrative frame moving in a state of flux. As is clear from the very beginning, rather than describing the digging, the letters, which become shorter as the story unfolds, disclose the narrators’ fears, pains and hallucinations, being interspersed with flashbacks and stream-of-consciousness associations. As already discussed above, Nina’s viewpoint, which opens and ends the story, is permeated with feelings of loss and psychosis. An Oxford researcher in Victorian literature, Nina continuously addresses her boyfriend David whom she has left behind in Britain, while the bleak Northern landscape gradually undermines her certainties, hindering her reading of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. The young woman’s ambivalent feelings are depicted through the elegiac language of loss which is associated with the night, when she has disturbing dreams set along the Arctic coastline. The long sequences of a “turf fire” (*Cold Earth* 5) crackling through the “grey fields in the fading light” (33) materialize images of panic and havoc, culminating with the vignette of “bodies [that] lie frozen in the outhouse [...] shoes buried in snow” (84). Her obsession with

death is particularly striking when she compares the cold landscape to a shelter, a premonition that anticipates the ambiguous end of the novel: "I curl unseen [. . .] so cold and tired that the grave itself tempts me with shelter and the promise of death" (84). These quotes well condense the pain for what she misses: Nina not only misses her boyfriend, but also mourns the food she used to eat and the comforts of a proper house instead of the tent where she has to dwell.

In line with her dreams, Nina finds herself in a cold, remote place, devoid of emotional ties and affective bonds. As she confesses, while washing herself in the icy stream close to the tents, "I thought I'd never move again and would be found by the next generation of archaeologists, a mad English woman frozen in a Greenlandic river" (11). Here, Moss distinguishes between the narrated self and the narrator: by displacing the self in time and space, Nina creates the basis "for other self-related actions such as self-disclosure, self-reflection and self-criticism" (Bamberg). As this comment illustrates, Nina seems to be aware of how things might evolve, revealing also an intense awareness of her own mental insanity. Her sense of detachment and entrapment is so strong that a 'sense of an ending' prevails. During a conversation with Catriona, the only colleague she creates any bond of friendship with, Nina declares "I think we're probably the last generation" (*Cold Earth* 81), a sentence that denies any likelihood of redemption. Thus, the absence of love and comfort places her in continual relation to the past, while the icy landscape and the mass graves contribute to push her shattered interiority on the brink of death and extinction.

If Nina's viewpoint is interspersed with the fears of not seeing her boyfriend any longer, while, the other characters' narratives similarly highlight an acute sense of vulnerability. Much like Nina's grievances, other forms of elegiac lamentations recur throughout the novel. Jim, for instance, seems one of the most wounded subjects of the novel. In his monologue, Jim chronicles various recollections of his family, like the merry atmosphere at Christmas or his mother's preparation of his favorite food. And yet, his memoirs portray an apocalyptic scenario. The opening paragraph of his chapter confirms the idea of writing as compensation, "a dramatic gesture" (183) where putting events into words mimics the archiving function so that "someone's going to find this and send it to you. To write as if you're still there to read it" (183). Recollections flow in Jim's consciousness, where life and death tend to merge into each other: "if love survives death," Jim muses, "the worst is not terrible. Painful, but not terrible." (194). By the end of the novel, when it becomes clear that the airplane scheduled to pick them up will not arrive, Jim's lamentation intensifies, revealing a fascination with oblivion and sacrifice:

I keep trying to pray. The phrases are too worn, I can't find the words anymore. Faith must be stronger than suffering; Christ crucified shows us how the image of God in man can withstand pain. I'm so cold and so hungry and I'm sorry about this but so scared, so cold and hungry and of what cold and hunger might do to us all. It is easy to feel forsaken. (251)

The syntactic articulation of the above-quoted passage, with the repetition of the adjectives "cold" and "hungry," foregrounds Jim's feelings, torn between the awareness of the severe situation he is enduring and the inability to find the proper words to register his condition. Furthermore, his reference to religious images of sacrifice lays emphasis on the redemptive force of suffering. The analogy drawn between Christ's death and the archaeologists' suffering is made clear by Jim's invocation of "a warm heaven, a Valhalla<sup>5</sup> of steaming mead and roaring fires" (251). Jim's reflections record a sense of powerlessness, a passion of sorts where words are scarce and religious motifs work as signs of atonement and compensation.

The evocation of images of pain and physical laceration are redolent of that apocalyptic atmosphere that pervades *Cold Earth*. They are further distillations of the archiving metaphor working in the novel: not only do the letter forms suggest an addressee who may share the archaeologists' traumas, they also epitomize the need to archive and transmit knowledge. Whereas archaeology means unearthing knowledge, writing becomes like a sepulcher, a way of burying things, turning them in what Ricœur calls an "inner presence":

Sepulcher, indeed, is not only a place set apart in our cities, the place we call a cemetery and in which we depose the remains of the living who return to dust. It is an act, the act of burying. This gesture is not punctual; it is not limited to the moment of burial. The sepulcher remains because the gesture of burying remains; its path is the very path of mourning that transforms the physical absence of the lost object into an inner presence. (366)

What Moss underscores is precisely this "inner presence" among distant temporalities as a kind of working through traumas where repetitions become vehicles for melancholic returns, thus making the novel an archive of the sense of loss itself. The narrative embeddedness of the novel reveals an attitude of encrypting the past. At the same time, narrating also anticipates loss by conjuring up ghosts and repeated situations of pain that all the six archaeologists seem to share. The novel

therefore moves back to itself, from the extinction of the Norse civilization in the Arctic to the possible end of humanity in the third millennium. In some ways, from a Derridean perspective, the narrative task eludes semantic stability. "There would be no archive desire," the French philosopher states, "without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression" (*Archive Fever* 19). Thus, archiving means attempting at finding traces though this quest is suffused with anxiety and amnesia.

In the final pages, when Nina takes over the narrative again, a sense of ambiguity triumphs, ultimately blurring temporal boundaries and the border between reality and fiction. A vision on the point of death? A long flashback narrated through personal letters by survivors of a possible collective tragedy? What readers vaguely learn is that the team is eventually saved, though this happens off the page. This last chapter takes the form of an epilogue where Nina provides retrospective knowledge of the end of the excavation campaign. She alludes to the return flight of the archaeologists from Nuuk to Copenhagen, highlighting the choral promise of "never go back" (*Cold Earth* 275) to Greenland. And yet, what seems to be the account of a happy ending hides a tragic consequence. In this chapter, Nina addresses Yianni who, as the reader realizes, has died in Greenland. Interestingly, Yianni's death is narrated through metatextual references to another letter by Yianni's mother to Nina. In this letter, the Greek woman asks Nina to go back to Greenland and scatter Yianni's ashes in the place "that makes sense of your [his] life" (277). Thus, Nina returns to Greenland and throws Yianni's ashes, drifting "like dark snow on the pale flowers of West Greenland" (278). Here, Nina notices the unchanged nature of the place and the traces they have left behind. She elegiacally observes that "hiding traces leaves traces" (278) and that eliminating the signs of their previous presence would be useless since "we were there [here]. We are history too" (278). This quote suggests that the landscape can become clogged with memory and archiving. Also, the novel's overarching organization, with the retrieval of information as new revelations come to light, reinforces the idea of writing as a sort of archival process that can only unearth fragments that readers will have to put together.

The Arctic, then, embodies Nora's "will to remember": it transforms a desolate environment where ancient signs are buried, investing it with a modern tragedy where the dead can be remembered, mourned, and commemorated. Oscillating between remembering and forgetfulness, memory frictions converge in the archive. If, as Derrida underlines, the archive derives from the "breakdown" of memory, there is "no archive without consignment in an external place, which assures



the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression" (*Archive Fever* 11). The archive, therefore, is subject to the logic of repetition-compulsion, and as such, it is indissociable from the death drive: there is no repetition, no return to the archive, without the possibility of forgetting traumatic contents. In other words, the archive exists as a place external to memory, allowing for recollections to emerge while, at the same time, it discloses something different from what memory is able to store. While we live in an age dominated "by new technical means of reproduction and preservation" (Nora 13), memory is still a trope in contemporary literature. In this regard, *Cold Earth* can be said to echo Nora's contention that "delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon them depositing there, as a snake sheds its skin" (13).

Returning to *Cold Earth*, self-narration as performed in the novel through letter-writing and recollections provides a means of accounting for the passage of time and establishing emotional connections. In traumatic contexts, as in *Cold Earth*, disasters can generate a failure of representation, facilitating a certain "limit of writing" (Blanchot 7). Disastrous situations wound subjectivities, and the menace of extinction erases any possibility of coherent testimony. When facing traumas, human subjects undergo radical changes and, if narrating fails, memory becomes the only way of opening up to futurity, transforming the subject into a post-melancholic archive.

### Coda: Melancholia and the Archive

In the very final scene of *Cold Earth*, Nina thinks over the most significant moments of her Arctic adventure while she is on the balcony of her London flat. Addressing Yianni ("you") who, as already discussed above, is dead, she evokes the Greenlanders, the frozen river, and the snow. Surrounded by the traffic, she temporarily abandons her super-ego, compared to a "surveillance camera" (*Cold Earth* 276) and goes out "with my [her] id" finding "refuge from both the laptop and the letter" (276). While the laptop and Yianni's mother's letter remind Nina of the haunting past, the chaos of the metropolis is a thriving element of life against the specter of the past. The return to the materiality of life awakens Nina to the need to recompose the fragments of her melancholic mind. Nina is willing to go back to Greenland and "incorporate what happened into my [her] life" (276). Whereas Freudian melancholia operates like "an open wound" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 262), establishing "an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (258; emphasis in the original), Nina strives to remove her attachment to loss. Once she is back to Greenland to scatter Yianni's ashes, she

quickly goes away, no longer sensing any presence. Conversely, she feels that it is “time to go” (278), thus rebutting the idea of annihilation the Arctic evokes. Nina’s return to the materiality of life, such as “struggling with the shopping” (272) and cooking food, does hint at a possible post-melancholic “recovery of the world” (Vermeulen 262). Thus, melancholia makes space for a possible compensation which emerges through writing.

What does it mean to find its own subjectivity in narrating? If writing is a way to restore a sense of the self, Nina’s last letter shows how the archive can move away from melancholic incorporations of grief and loss, providing a way out of paralysis and elegiac contemplation. This leads, as Pieter Vermeulen argues, to a recovering of material reality that “gestures towards a more affirmative recreation of a decidedly post-melancholic reality” (260). Nina’s final words find an echo in Derrida’s vision of the archive, as a place existing in a state of transition, “in states of secret becoming” (Boulter 184). As time goes by, Nina readjusts to her ‘normal’ way of life, though the archive preserves the scars in her memory, reminding the character and the reader of their responsibility for the future. In the recent pandemic, when we similarly have to cope with pain, the archive unveils the presence of the past, providing a possibly healing and compensative space for remembrance. In this sense, archiving environmental apocalypse and human vulnerability occurs in a state of no ends, entailing a continual process of transformation and repetition, as my reading of Moss’s novel has tried to demonstrate. The archive represented in *Cold Earth*, being the geological inscriptions embedded in a gothic landscape, a psychological tunneling process or an archaeological survey, finds its shape through writing. In this sense, to conclude, human subjectivities corrupt the secret layers of the archive: by narrating melancholic attachments to loss and grief, the subject becomes archive, allowing for trauma to be mourned and possibly coped with.

## NOTES

1. Moss’s portrayal of the Arctic as a solitary environment where hallucinations and ghostly visions loom large is possibly related to her studies of the influence of Northern literatures on English Romanticism. In her travel memoir about her teaching experience in Iceland, *Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland* (2012), the British author reveals her fascination with the wild Arctic environment. The premise of *Cold Earth* returns in Moss’s sixth novel, *Ghost Wall* (2018). Here, a group of students is inquiring into the Iron Age while on a campaign expedition in rural Northumberland. Likewise, Moss’s latest

novel, *Summerwater* (2020), is imbued with the natural rhythms of the landscape of the Scottish Highlands.

2. Cairns are piles of stones used both as landmarks and funerary monuments.

3. *Gradiva*, meaning “she who walks,” tells the story of Hanold, an archaeologist in search of the footprints of a bas-relief showing a woman walking: oppressed by the visions of this female figure, he eventually finds a woman in the streets of Pompeii whom he takes for Gradiva. According to Freud (1907), Jensen’s novella can be read from a psychoanalytical perspective and the archaeologist’s hallucinations are symptomatic of sexual repression.

4. Nora distinguishes between *lieux d’histoire* and *lieux de mémoire*: while the first are institutional and official sites, like museums and monuments, which record historical events, the latter are “material, symbolic and functional” places spontaneously “created by a play of memory and history” (Nora 19).

5. In Norse mythology, the word “Valhalla” denotes large halls where soldiers killed in combat were invited to feast with Odin in eternity. Valhalla is featured in many Norse poems and sagas, including the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda* dating back to the thirteenth century.

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