

A Momentary Lapse in Memory: An Inquiry into (Re)Memory and Trauma Embodiment

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Abstract

This essay investigates the impact of the archival practice on oral histories of conflict. Specifically, it asks to what capacity can the lived experience be devoured by the grinding machine of forced institutional remembrance, and how can it defy such a predicament? The inquiry to this question was studied through the oral history of the author's friends, family and neighbors concerning the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. This military intervention was done in response to the oppressive regime of Slobodan Milošević and remains fresh in the Serbian collective memory. Utilizing qualitative generative interviews, a case study of the author's parents' approaches to archiving, and personal footage recorded by the Radio-Television of Serbia, the paper examines differences between institutional and personal archival practices. The analysis displays that institutional remembrance can claim the lived experience through collective memory, which is reinstated by commemorative practices and archiving. In contrast, oral histories of conflict result in a different type of narrative-building and remembering. They are characterized by mechanisms such as collective editing, transmission, and non-linearity, which resist standardization and instrumentalization. This paper advocates for reconsidering static preservation-oriented modes of institutional archiving, proposing instead, to embrace non-reproducible aspects or the unreliable of oral history.

On the State of Rituals

A few days after I was born, NATO started its military intervention against the country I was born in—Yugoslavia.¹ At the time, Yugoslavia had already been riddled with war for almost a decade, resulting in destruction, thousands of deaths, and displacement. The intervention began because, the then leader of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milošević was ethnically cleansing Kosovo Albanians; and although Milošević was stopped then, the issues he caused persisted much longer. Kosovo's statehood is still not recognized by Serbia at the time of writing this essay (AJLabs, 2023).

Trying to understand what happened some 24 years after the intervention, I searched through the documentation; how long did the bombing last, which buildings were hit, and which bridges were severed. But this information left gaps in understanding, ghosts of silenced media coverage, and more questions about my home and community.² So, I turned towards my family, friends, and neighbours to capture what is unaddressed; not through the rigid lens of a neatly kept narrative behind institutional walls, but through the lived experiences of those who remain. But to what capacity can the lived experience be devoured by the grinding machine of forced institutional remembrance, and how can it defy such a predicament?

During a talk with my mother, she told me that my baptism had been recorded by the national radio television of Serbia (RTS) during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Together, we searched for the video, unsure of whether it has survived the bombing, since the building in which it was stored was hit.³ We dug, as Balkan people do, not by sending emails to institutions, but by asking people we know—who know the right people. What would have otherwise been an intimate familial viewing of an old recording, shared with a few close people, was sitting in the archive of RTS. Once the file landed on my desktop, *I watched it with growing unease, scene by scene* (Note: Descriptions of the images are [in bracket]):

*[Title sequence: Baptism in Rakovica Monastery,
May 9th 1999].⁴*

*I have been told this was the only day NATO did not bomb.
In Yugoslavia it is known as the Victory Day of WWII.⁵*

*[Shot of the church from outside shows the broken windows
covered by tape.]*

*The church closest to our house is up on the Straževica hill.
The most heavily bombed part of the municipality of Rakovica.⁶
The hill with both a military complex and the oldest holy
object in Belgrade (Vasiljević).*

*[The camera zooms in on its current state.]
[The priest chants and pours holy water over my head.]*

*[I am screaming my lungs out. My father is unsuccessfully
trying to console me with a pacifier. In a single frame,
he looks directly into the camera, worried.]*

He knows this recording will be aired on TVs across what has been left of Yugoslavia.

In dire circumstances, such as *this* war, a baptism can be performed at home. Such a ritual relies solely on the faith of the devotee for its authenticity and is called a baptism “of necessity”. I can’t help but ask why my baptism was not performed in such a way? Instead, there was an unconscious insistence on performing the ritual the *proper* way.

While watching, it becomes clear that through this event, not only was I merged into the institution of Orthodox Christianity, but into the institution of remembrance itself.⁷ Through televising my baptism, the image of my innocence becomes conflated with what it means to be Orthodox Christian amid the active war crimes against Kosovo Albanians. What would have been an intimate familial ceremony now holds a key to the constructed social memory of a community. Paul Connerton, a social anthropologist known for his work on social and body memory, argues that “if there is such a thing as social memory, we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies” (70–71) which are enacted through performative ritual, habit, and bodily automatism (4–5). Connerton described the ritual, not as a “symbolic representation but a species of performance”. This particular performance, like many rituals, is comprised of a coded message:

*[My godfather talks about collectivity, hope, new life being
brought into this world.]*

<i>The child becomes</i>	<i>a part of the religion</i>	<i>a part of the collective</i>
	<i>saved from damnation</i>	<i>saved from immorality</i>
	<i>(reunited with) Christ</i>	<i>the hope (of a new future)</i>

“During a military intervention, the broadcast of my baptism was used to display a sense of ‘hope.’ But I believe no one involved in the recording knew what we remember through such a commemorative ceremony. We are primarily reminded of our identity, which is ‘represented by and told in [the group's] master narrative’ (Connerton, 70).”

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A ritual relies on the body as a vessel to transmit and teach, to tell the message imbedded within it.⁸ Informed by Connerton's insights, Keightley investigated how rituals functioned as a "site of memory," particularly in Christian communities. The messages, "vivid memories of Jesus," "came to be embedded into the commemorative ritual of baptism and eucharist" (146).

Since Orthodox Christianity is a liturgical faith—the belief is enacted in a service of carefully prescribed rituals (Scroope). Emphasis is put on worship (through ritual) first, and doctrine second (Neapóleos, 25–30). These rituals are called "mysteria" since they are believed to be mysteries that cannot be rationalized, (Scroope), only performed.⁹ Ritual surfaces above the need for doctrine and the written word.¹⁰

Boris Groys, whose work stretches across the fields of media theory, philosophy, art, and politics, posits that although "ritual, repetition and reproduction were hitherto matters of religions" in the modern age of digital reproduction and neoliberal capitalism they have "become the fate of the entire world." Capital, commodity, technology, and art are all prone to reproduction (Groys). Which allowed for religion to resurface and become increasingly successful. Groys argues that religious language is the language of repetition, and that this language is embedded into the ritual. In his essay, Groys stresses the difference between two kinds of repetitions in ritual, the repetition of the living spirit (the modifiable inner message of a religious ritual) and the repetition of the dead letter (the external form of a ritual). Here, in the instance of my baptism, the recording itself is the medium which speaks the language of the latter kind of repetition. It allows for the baptism to be performed the same way, each time it is re-played, regardless of whether any of the participants believe in the inner message of the ritual.

It is hard to talk about remembering without mentioning collective memory as it was pushed forward by sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs. The basic premise is that we create memories and deal with the past in relation to our social environment, not in isolation (38–40). Memory is constructed socially (as paraphrased by Uro, 164), and "the past is not preserved but reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs, 40). This concept was echoed and expanded in many areas memory has an influence on. Ewa Górka, who specializes in sociology of law and culture, noted the inseparability and mutual dependence of identity, nation states, and memory (8): "Societies are bonded by their shared collective memories, and in most nations, there is a dominating political elite view on the past – a master collective memory (Zerubavel, 3–12). Most of the time it is simultaneously an official, state-sponsored memory, produced to 'maintain social cohesion and defend symbolic borders' (Jelin, 26–49)".

“A ritual relies on the body as a vessel to transmit and teach, to tell the message imbedded within it.”

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Górska pointed out how to build these dominant narratives, state-sponsored memory excludes events that don't contribute to the state's "positive self-image" (8). This means the political elite's views of the past are favoured, while marginalized voices, who are often on the receiving end of state violence, are left out (Górska, 9).

During a military intervention, the broadcast of my baptism was used to display a sense of "hope". But I believe no one involved in the recording knew *what* we remember through such a commemorative ceremony. We are primarily reminded of our identity, which is "represented by and told in [the group's] master narrative" (Connerton, 70). Besides the people participating in commemorative practises, there are other "active agents" who decide on what gets remembered and what forgotten: archivists (Cook, 170).

Haunted Archiving

Institutional archives are an important element in how collective memory is built. As Nora said "modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (13). Early professional archiving, similar to early professional history, focused on the political character of the nation state. These traditional approaches meant that, as state employees, archivists were conditioned to privilege the official narratives of the state, rather than the documented stories of individuals and groups in society (Cook, 172). According to Cook, "archivists are active agents in constructing social and historical memory," and this act of construction, he argues – starts with appraisal – determining the value of an element that could become part of the archive (170).

When I talk about the practice of archiving here, I include a duality: *institutional archival practices* and *personal archival practices*. As Uro emphasized, to understand how societies remember, we have to understand how the human brain stores and distorts information (164). Here I would argue that along with the brain it is crucial to know how memory is stored in the body. As Bourdieu's highlighted: "Enacted belief, instilled by the

childhood learning that treats the body as a living memory pad, an automaton that ‘leads the mind unconsciously along with it’” (68–69). Both him and Connerton, underlined the importance of habit and bodily automatism in the storing of information in the body.¹¹

Somewhere in the early 2000s, my mother took me out for a stroll in the carriage. She ran into her late father’s friends who were eager to know all the details about the newborn. When asked for my name, exhausted from sleep deprivation, my mother could not remember.

Despite this *momentary lapse in memory*, she was a hoarder of many goods. She did not use to be one, but as life got filled with more uncertainty and loss, she found a greater need to preserve. We would often go through her family’s photographs and memorabilia. Communist party membership cards from her parents. Photos of familial festivities in Montenegro. Postcards from the scattered diaspora of relatives. With each viewing, the act of going through this collection remained largely the same, subject to becoming ritualistic in nature. A performance of examining all the evidence of our existence as a family.

Although personally in opposition to the government, my mother has always worked for a state institution. One that oversees creating standards, which range anywhere from the protocols of producing metal pipes to the allowed percentage of chemical compounds in food. For the creation of such a standard, a committee is formed, and it writes and agrees upon what the standard in question is. Within this institution, my mother works as an editor, a person who spends all their time carefully correcting the language of these standards, until they are representative of the institution. Afterwards, every service or process of production will conform to the standard because it embodies the status quo. She also had a habit of cautiously selecting what we do or do not say about an institution of our own: *our family*. For instance, my father’s fondness for alcohol was never spoken of. There was an emphasis on portraying or performing an image of a reliable family.

There is a literal and metaphorical heaviness to holding on to data. It takes up the storage in your room and in your head: megabytes into gigabytes onto hard drives upon hard drives. One becomes a person with “baggage”, a code word for many things, but trauma could be one of them.¹² Oftentimes, and in this case as well, this baggage is filled with holes, whole items sink and leave a trace behind you. By the time it is handed to the next generation, there are many questions that arise. Being raised after the onset of trauma, leaves one to fight or flee our “ancestor’s war, as we carry out transgenerational errands” (Apprey 3–29, as paraphrased by Grand and Salberg, 210).

After years of my mother working for and within an institution, she has internalized and further performed its oppressive inner workings. Treating objects as testimonial evidence, editing and selecting them to build a narrative. This was of course not done with malicious intent or through simple naiveté, but because of exposure in dosage through time, which caused her to be immunized towards these mechanisms. This immunization does not mean that the ritualistic performance merely continues and is done without consideration, but that it is done with the notion of protection. Similarly to interacting with viruses, those that are immune most easily traverse to the source of the illness, while trying to protect and keep vary of those who are less shielded.

Especially those who have never been part of the institutional, like my father.

His concerned glance at the camera recording the baptism reminds me of a scene from Bugs Bunny. While being strangled by a monster, Bugs points to the camera saying “Wait, do you ever get the feeling that you’re being watched?” The monster, in turn, literally breaks four walls by running away from the camera shouting “PEOPLE!” (Jones et al, 49). Where Bugs points to the onlookers as witnesses, the monster is more afraid of people as a species that captures, whether through recording or in tangible ways.

Where religious fundamentalism favors immaculate reproduction of a ritual, the video recording performs the ritual each time, without a mistake. It subjects the ritual to standardization. Here, my mother’s examination of family memorabilia uses objects as mediums of a performance which happens each time in the same, or suspiciously similar, way. But my father’s weariness of being captured by the recording and turned into something infinitely reproducible speaks to the opposite current. That of embodying a more elusive force: *the unreliable*.

Unlike my mother, he had no affinity for storing objects. Nonetheless, or precisely because of this, he found great satisfaction in pointing out my mother’s hoarding habits, saying that her inability to let go will bury her in her own apartment. In contrast, he had no material traces of his family, only snippets of information dispersed through alcohol-induced nights and then forgotten the day after.

The Patterns of the Unreliable

It is worth noting that when internalizing or opposing an institution, there is a difference between the personal and institutional approaches to memory itself.

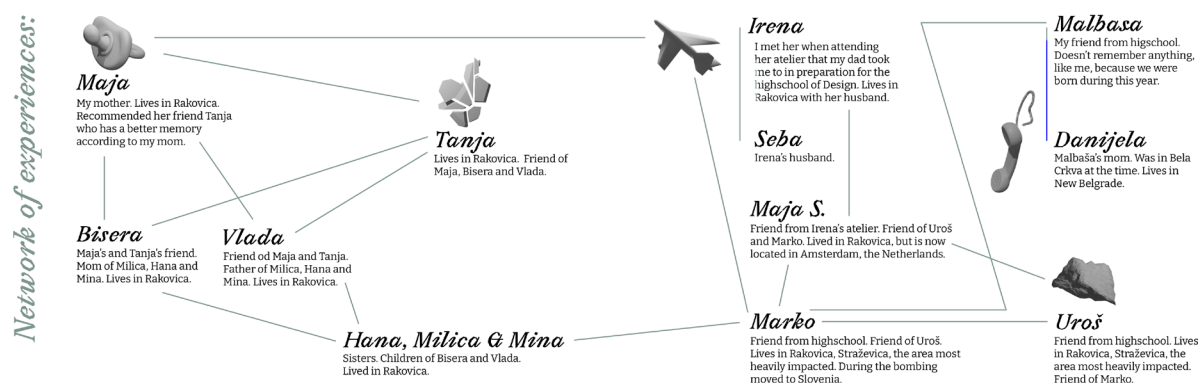


Figure 1: *Map of interviewee recommendations* (by the author, July 7 2023).

To investigate this, I have conducted generative interview sessions with people in my personal network, mainly located in the county of Rakovica. Each interviewee, after their interview, would recommend a person whose memory they trusted more than their own (see fig. 1).

These generative interview sessions were research into and through oral history. They consisted of a preliminary interview, in which I would pose open questions that were not aimed at direct inquiry.¹³ Instead, I would ask about the remnants, such as the ruins still present in the city, or the sonic memories still lingering with them. Afterwards, I would create a soundscape and a digital environment based on their memories.¹⁴ This I would offer back to the interviewees to continue the dialogue. Gradually, through their engagement and feedback, they would become co-creators of the pieces.

Oral history's position in academia "emerged as shadows from institutionally established fields" (Lucas and Strain, 259). The subjectivity, reliability, and validity of oral history, especially in comparison to written evidence (Grele, 65) have been put into question, but since most of these points have been addressed through theoretical work (Lucas and Strain, 259), oral histories are becoming a more prominent part of institutional archives.¹⁵

This is not to say that there are no issues in integrating oral histories into archives, which I will return to later in the text. I will first mention that, as Lucas and Strain have pointed out, "one of the most compelling issues surrounding oral interviewing is the element of memory". They elaborated on the fact that memories too, in anticipation of an interview, are prepared and performed. Yet, they emphasize that the "dialogic nature" of the oral interview aims to also prompt recall of new and deeply buried memories (269). With this essay, my wish is to bring light to mechanisms of the oral interview which the institutional archive could learn from. These mechanisms are largely constituted by being non-reproducible and part of *the unreliable*.

Conversational Narrative

Among the first aspects of these mechanisms or aspects of oral history are what Nelms indicated rhetoricians call “invention” or the collaborative discovery and creation of (historical) meaning (378). Due to the rhetorical complexities of interviews, scholars such as Grele avoid the term, and use “conversational narratives” to describe oral history interviews (Grelle, 62–84). This term is supposed to encompass the activities the interviewee and interviewer do to construct knowledge together (Lucas and Strain, 275). What I have noticed in conducting group interviews, is precisely this dynamic, not just between the interviewer and interviewee, but between all the interviewees. They participate in what I would like to propose as a process of ‘*collective editing*’. Here I would give two examples, one a scene from Mohamed Soueid’s *Nightfall*, and the other from my interview with my godparents’ family.

In *Nightfall*, the filmmaker is meeting his former comrades, Lebanese students who joined the Palestinian resistance movement ‘Fatah’. Conversations in *Nightfall* are mediated through drinking, which one of the people in it characterized as drinking to remember, instead of to forget.

In one of the scenes, all the participants of the conversation discuss a much larger topic through a minor detail. They are talking about the Egyptian president Abdel-Nasser, who is known for his anti-imperialist efforts and striving towards Arab unity, but they do not mention any of this. Instead, they debate his eye colour, specifically whether it was green or dark blue (Soueid). This leads to a more important resolution of how he was portrayed in print and why—with green eyes to look more European.

Similar to this scene, my godparents’ family talked about one of the larger bombs that fell on Straževica. The parents recalled that the bomb itself was merely a ton or two, while their two daughters, aged ten and thirteen at the time of it happening, thought it was five and seven tons respectively. Any claim of factual knowledge would become a point of discussion and collective recollection. No story was static or set in stone. This is quite opposite to providing a fixed fact agreed on in written form.

Transmission, Value, and Agreement

This idea of collective editing is similar to the very working of memory; it is characterized by how it travels rather than how it is agreed upon. As Jussi Parikka describes: “memory works through the social and is more like transmission than storage. That’s how memory is refreshed and kept alive on a social level too” (Dekker and Parikka, 68–77). It resides in the context of all the people who share it through oral means, instead of in a vacuum.

Here I would like to draw a parallel between oral history and the poor image, as described by Hito Steyerl. As the poor image travels from phone to phone, app to app, it loses quality (resolution) with each transmission. This does not make the image, the recording, and by extension the oral history, any less worthy, but the opposite. Their value lies in being spread as opposed to being preserved (in high resolution). Steyerl also points out that this transmission drafts users into production (Steyerl); they become editors, critics, translators and (co-)authors of the poor image. Analogously, oral history invites interviewees to become part of the invention of historical narrative. This process is one that archives would benefit from, since “memory is always transitory, unreliable, and haunted by forgetting, and cannot be stored for eternity no matter how hard we try to secure it with monuments and digital retrieval systems” (Huyssen, 21–38). This point alone, necessitates a turn away from pristine preservation and static storage, towards an archive in transmission.

Listening, Breath, and Editing

When talking about the integration of oral histories into archives, there is a prominent tension when moving from the oral to the printed form. From one medium to the other there is a process of translation that arises. As observed by Lucas and Strain, the edited version(s) could greatly differ from the original transcriptions, and this depends on the editing preferences of the researchers (271). In my own experience of transcribing and translating into written text, I felt discomfort with each omission of a conversation filler such as an “umm” or a “y’know.” Anyone conducting oral history interviews must be attuned and dedicated to a good listening practice, and this includes noticing what is not said, what lives in the breaths, pauses and gaps between words. Anderson and Jack go as far as to say that “we need to interpret the[ir] pauses and, when it happens, the[ir] unwillingness or inability to respond” (163).

Another factor of listening is paying close attention to the repetition of details the interviewees recall, as “interviews are rarely linear and are often recursive” (Lucas and Strain, 267). Lucas and Strain emphasize that these details, inflections, and silences can tell us which questions are burdensome to answer.

Bennet acknowledges the difference of narrative and traumatic memory, in which narrative memory is one where a subject remembers the context of a feeling, without re-living the feeling. Whereas traumatic memory resists processing into a narrative, and instead re-lives the feeling as if it were situated in the present (Bennet 23–25). As such, I would argue that

traumatic memory in the context of an oral history interview calls for a different reading and a different translation. Editing out all the details, pauses, breaths, would mean to negate the nature of this kind of memory and to model it to what we understand as the norm of remembering: narrative memory.

Resurrection Interrupted - Instead of a Conclusion: Closure

One could say that my father's approach to memory, that of getting drunk, transmitting it through talking and then forgetting, is a trauma-induced approach to archiving (as is my mother's), but it is also one that is in defiance of creating purposeful narratives. When he was sober, the concern of being perceived, or rather recorded, created in my father a perpetual silence.¹⁶ This refusal to give information out, would be disrupted while drinking, causing the information to float to the surface. Alcohol in this instance, is the medium which, unlike the video, resists perfect reproduction and in turn standardization. It encourages unpredictable remembering, things we might not want to be reminded of easily pop back into our consciousness.

Due to embodying the unreliable, it was my mother—who has microdosed the institutional way until it could do her no harm—who also had the final say on what gets told. Forced institutional remembrance can easily devour the lived experience of individuals through collective memory, which is reinstated by commemorative practices and archiving. Not only can it devour, but also claim lived experiences by creeping into personal habits of archiving and memory construction. Bearing witness to the enactments of reliable narrative memory, I can observe that it omits what doesn't align with 'the positive self-image' just the same as institutions do.

But how can personal experiences and oral history defy such a predicament? Since difficult, conflict-ridden histories might cause a shift in the type of remembering and narrative-building a person is prone to, they also ask for different institutional approaches to archiving. The difference they should look to are the mechanisms of oral history that resist standardization and instead necessitate for careful listening and reading, that might have to change each time.¹⁷ These mechanisms could be placed in three broad categories of *collective editing*, *transmission*, and *non-linearity*. By embracing these, the archival practice would not only resist standardization, but become non-reproducible, and by extension closer to the unreliable.

“There is a literal and metaphorical heaviness to holding on to data. It takes up the storage in your room and in your head: megabytes into gigabytes onto hard drives upon hard drives. One becomes a person with ‘baggage’, a code word for many things, but trauma could be one of them. Oftentimes, and in this case as well, this baggage is filled with holes, whole items sink and leave a trace behind you. By the time it is handed to the next generation, there are many questions that arise. Being raised after the onset of trauma, leaves one to fight or flee our ‘ancestor's war, as we carry out transgenerational errands’ (Apprey 3–29, as paraphrased by Grand and Salberg, 210).”

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Endnotes

- 1 On March 24th 1999.
- 2 For more information on Milošević's censorship and silencing of both news broadcasters and academic spaces see "Deepening authoritarianism in Serbia: The purge of the universities; Background." from the Human Rights Watch.
- 3 RTS, Radio-Television Serbia, was hit on 23rd April 1999. For reference see aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/17/mapping-the-countries-that-recognise-kosovo-as-a-state-2. Where the building stood was commemorated by leaving the ruins exposed. For more information on this, see "Achieved without Ambiguity?": Memorializing Victimhood in Belgrade after the 1999 NATO Bombing" from Gruia Bădescu.
- 4 The stills of the baptism recording are described inside brackets instead of placed into the text as images. This has been done due to the fact that including the images would cause numerous copyright issues and infringements.

- ⁵ There is a difference between the celebrations of, respectively 8th and 9th of May. Non-EU Eastern Europe states celebrate the 9th of May as the Victory Day of Soviet forces over Nazi Germany in WWII. Whereas among EU members the 8th of May is celebrated as the Victory Day of WWII, while the 9th of May is called Europe day and commemorates peace and prosperity in Europe. The latter was formed on the day the Schuman declaration was made; a declaration put in place to “make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible.” For more information see: european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en.
- ⁶ In the report “Downed NATO pilot rescued, U.S. officials say” of CNN, Straževica’s military complex is referred to as “a military communication’s site in Rakovica.” For reference see: edition.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9903/27/nato.strike.03/. Straževica has also been referred to as “the only place that was bombed each of the 78 days of the aerial bombing” by RTS Beogradska Jutarnja Hronika Program. For reference see youtube.com/watch?v=iLH6GbddVQE (in Serbian).
- ⁷ Orthodox Christians that I know have never expressed this belief vocally, yet, in Serbia you often hear the question of “Јеси ли ти крштен?” (“Are you baptised?”) when you have done something outrageous or out of the norm. The question is a test of normalcy.
- ⁸ Connector also pointed out that there is an aspect of social memory that is neglected and overlooked: bodily social memory. He underlined that performative memory is bodily and elaborated on the kinds of bodily memory in his concept of “bodily practices”.
- ⁹ Mysteries are comprised of the Seven Holy Sacraments, including the baptism.
- ¹⁰ This is without acknowledging in length that early Christian societies were not literate, and there was a need to transmit messages through a medium (public performance) other than the written word. To read about this further, see Risto Uro’s “Ritual, Memory and Writing in Early Christianity”.
- ¹¹ Commemorative practices and bodily memory both try to ensure that they won’t be questioned by those performing them. The values they want to protect from questioning get conserved through bodily automatisms and habitual memory (Connerton, 102).
- ¹² There has been work written on the correlation between hoarding and the traumatic experiences an individual goes through. Higher rates of trauma exposure were associated with stronger emotional attachment to possessions (Chou et al, 85).
- ¹³ E.g., “Where were you at the time of the event?”.
- ¹⁴ Both the soundscapes and digital environment were created based on the details the interviewees kept recalling or ones they would linger on. The environment was built in a 3D modelling software (Blender).
- ¹⁵ In their article, Lucas and Strain give the example of the American Memory Project, which was sponsored by the U.S. Library of Congress, and gathered a wide array of life histories. This archival initiative included both online, audio and print collection of marginalized voices, such as the “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938” or the “Tibetan Oral History Project.”

- ¹⁶ Instead of the flight mode the monster from Bugs Bunny went into in order to escape being seen.
- ¹⁷ The method of the oral interview must be modular and dependant on the context. As oral historian Donald A. Richie emphasized “An interview must always be prepared to abandon carefully prepared questions and follow the interviewee down unexpected path” (9).