

Records and their imaginaries: imagining the impossible, making possible the imagined

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Abstract This paper argues that the roles of individual and collective imaginings about the absent or unattainable archive and its contents should be explicitly acknowledged in both archival theory and practice. We propose two new terms: impossible archival imaginaries and imagined records. These concepts offer important affective counterbalances and sometimes resistance to dominant legal, bureaucratic, historical and forensic notions of evidence that so often fall short in explaining the capacity of records and archives to motivate, inspire, anger and traumatize. The paper begins with a reflection on how imagined records have surfaced in our own work related to human rights. It then reviews some of the ways in which the concept of the imaginary has been understood by scholarship in other fields. It considers how such interpretations might contribute epistemologically to the phenomenon of impossible archival imaginaries; and it provides examples of what we argue are impossible archival imaginaries at work. The paper moves on to examine specific cases and “archival stories” involving imagined records and contemplate how they can function societally in ways similar to actual records because of the weight of their absence or because of their aspirational nature. Drawing upon threads that run through these cases, we propose definitions of both phenomena that not only augment the current descriptive, analytical and explicatory armaments of archival theory and practice but also open up the possibility of “returning” them (Ketelaar in *Research in the archival multiverse*. Monash University Press, Melbourne 2015a) as theoretical contributions to the fields from which the cases were drawn.

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Introduction

Feminist cultural studies scholar Maryanne Dever is known for her work on how and the extent to which intimacy is captured in archives as well as for her examination of ethical and moral issues arising when private papers are held in public archives (Dever et al. 2009). In her article “Greta Garbo’s Foot, or Sex, Socks and Letters” (2010), Dever discusses the media speculation that built up around a set of materials contained in the collection of Spanish aristocrat Mercedes de Acosta that is held by the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. Acosta was rumored to have been actress Greta Garbo’s lover and these materials, which were embargoed until 10 years after Garbo’s death, include 55 letters from Garbo to Acosta. However, when the embargoed materials were finally opened in 2000, at an event unfortunately reminiscent of other deflating media spectacles such as US reporter and television talk-show host Geraldo Rivera’s much-hyped opening of a secret vault once owned by gangster Al Capone, there was nothing in their contents to support the theory of a romantic relationship between Garbo and Acosta. Dever writes:

What we have in this “archive story” is the absence of something frequently represented as core to the archival experience: the so-called archival “pay dirt” moment (Burton 2005, 8). In this case, those present at the opening failed to find whatever it was they hoped (or dreaded) the letters would offer. Yet their representation of this apparent absence becomes—in the telling—evidence of another sort: evidence of the thing which does not exist. Their role in the constitution of this absence—the “nothing” or “no evidence” that is in itself evidence—is effaced in the telling (2010, p. 164).

She continues:

Those confident declarations of “nothingness” also lack any sustained consideration of the forces that shape archives in general—and this one in particular... (p.164).

The trajectory of this “archive story” is likely familiar to many archivists. When records that are known to exist relating to a controversial, mysterious or simply gossip-attracting event, figure or relationship are withheld from public view by archivists or others, this will often lead to scholarly and/or popular speculation, media hype and even literary or filmic production about their contents. The eventual revealing of such records inevitably risks incurring disappointment in the ordinariness or absence of their anticipated contents, if not open dismay and disbelief on the part of the imaginers (notwithstanding that it is often the ordinariness and routineness of records that can provide the most compelling, even damning evidence). Nevertheless, for as long they remain either inaccessible or their

contents or very existence remains purely speculative, the records as imagined or anticipated can inspire all sorts of narratives, suppositions, aspirations, longings, fears and distrust that, as Dever notes, become “forces that shape archives” (2010, p. 164). These imaginings or projections may be manifested in scholarly, juridical, fictional and artistic representations, and arguments and interpolations that can continue to exert scholarly and popular influence even after the records have been opened and their actual contents exposed. Just as importantly, however, imagined-but-unavailable records can serve as fertile sources of personal and public affect that is not only a significant human and ethical consideration in itself but also can be activated and manipulated for a variety of political and social ends (Gilliland 2015a). Gilliland has defined affect in such contexts as:

...the human capacity that encompasses, independently and in various combinations, emotions of all sorts: positive or negative, paralyzing and disaffecting or energizing and rallying. More than this, the concept of affect itself embodies innate tensions that influence both cognition (how knowledge is gained, processed and understood through thought, experience and the senses) and behavior (how one acts or reacts in response to a particular situation, in a given role, or in relation to others). Affect occurs and operates differently from individual to individual and moment to moment. While in some cases it may be triggered involuntarily, it is not necessarily irrational and may draw upon deep and often under-recognized aspects of individual experience and environment (Gilliland 2015b)

Although practicing archivists are likely aware of these kinds of affects, whether intuitively or anecdotally, dominant strands of archival theory and practice both maintain an unreflexive preoccupation with the actual, the instantiated, the accessible and the deployable—that is, with records that have presence, established evidentiary capacity, and identifiable users and uses. Archivists currently offer little conceptual space for acknowledging, or practical guidance for addressing, the existence of or roles played by the content, record or archive as these might be imagined (Gilliland 2015). In his classic article “What is Information?” however, information scientist Michael Buckland asserts that “It is not uncommon to infer that some sort of evidence, of which we are not aware, *ought* to or might exist and, if found, would be of particular importance as evidence...” (1999, p. 356). Dever, with her example of literal absences in the archive and the affects associated with such absences (i.e., previously embargoed materials were opened and did not contain what some hoped or feared might be there), underscores the inability of archival practices to account for the meanings and sentiments that might be attributed to or incurred by such absence. In this paper therefore, we argue that the roles of individual and collective imaginings about the absent or unattainable archive and its contents should be explicitly acknowledged, in both archival theory and practice. What we are calling *impossible archival imaginaries* and the affect associated with the *imagined records* produced within those imaginaries, offer important affective counterbalances and sometimes resistance to dominant legal, bureaucratic, historical and forensic notions of evidence that so often fall short in explaining the capacity of records and archives to motivate, inspire, anger and

traumatize. Augmenting Dever's observations, we explore these two related phenomena as they are manifested in different contexts.

We begin with a reflection on how they have surfaced in our own work related to human rights. We then review some of the ways in which the concept of the *imaginary* has been understood by scholarship in other fields in order to contextualize the proposed concepts within wider disciplinary understandings as well as to consider how such interpretations might contribute epistemologically to the phenomenon of impossible archival imaginaries; and we provide examples of what we argue are impossible archival imaginaries at work. We move on to examine specific cases and "archival stories" involving imagined records and contemplate how they can function societally in ways similar to actual records because of the weight of their absence or because of their aspirational nature (i.e., because an individual or community wants it to exist, or wills it into an imagined existence). Drawing upon threads that run through these cases, we propose definitions of both phenomena that not only augment the current descriptive, analytical and explicatory armaments of archival theory and practice but also open up the possibility of "returning" them (Ketelaar 2015a) as theoretical contributions to the fields from which the cases were drawn.

Background

In a recent article discussing the nature and understandings of archival evidence in connection with the trials of former Khmer Rouge Deputy Prime Minister Ieng Sary and Serbian President Slobodan Milošević for war crimes and crimes against humanity, we delineated how, as a result of their deaths during the course of trial proceedings, a form of forever-from-now-on unavailable and thus unassailable imagined evidence was created (Caswell and Gilliland 2015). We argued that Sary and Milošević each embodied a kind of never-actualized record [Dever's imagined "pay-dirt" (p. 164)] in the minds of the victims and possibly a wider public by virtue of both their indictment and their "lost" testimony (in the case of Sary). These imagined records, however, can never be cross-examined and can never incontrovertibly reveal the intent that it is necessary in law to prove in order to achieve a conviction for war crimes and crimes against humanity (Halilovich 2015). Of course, the record-that-never-was, or the forever-missing-record are problems that archivists, as well as lawyers, historians, genealogists and authors of fiction regularly encounter and adjust their practices accordingly to address (Johnson and Thomas 2015; Ketelaar 2015a; Carey 2000; Morris 1999). Ketelaar has argued that "counter-archivalization," by which he means the "conscious or unconscious decision NOT to record or write down," (2015b) is an important cause for the record-that-never-was. Such decisions or actions might happen in situations where fear, duress or concealment was present, or simply in an attempt to sustain an illusion of pursuing appropriate protocols in official process (Trace 2002). The forever-missing-record can be inferred, for example, from control mechanisms such as registers, classification schemes and indexes, and records destruction schedules and lists; from documentation of materials available or targeted for acquisition but

never acquired such as auction catalogs or correspondence with potential donors; or through reconstructions based on remaining traces and relationships between records or from what is known about the kinds of records that must have been created (Ketelaar 2015b). And it should not be forgotten that the record-that-never-was and the forever-missing-record also present enticing opportunities to meet societal longings for and imaginings about absent records or silences in the records through forgery. Forgeries can themselves exercise considerable and sometimes very dangerous power over the public imagination, as the case of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which was used as a major anti-Semitic weapon by Germany's Third Reich, unfortunately illustrates all too well.

Because they never actually existed in the imagined form (i.e., they were never actualized), it might seem inappropriate to attach the designation of *records* with all the connotations of authoritativeness and tangibility that tend to be associated with the notions of records as legal or bureaucratic evidence. However, this is just the point—outside the realms of legal and bureaucratic evidence it can be demonstrated, time and again, that whatever society, agency, community or individual acts upon or invests in as a record, indeed functions in that context as a record. Sometimes it is actualized in tangible, virtual or performative form, and sometimes it exists in the imaginary, premised in both affect and effect. Drawing upon the reactions to the deaths of Sary and Milošević, we argued that:

Conjured by the unattainable hopes for closure by survivors and victims' families, such imaginary documents are bound by their impossibility; they are always out of grasp, falsely promising to make sense of the nonsensical, always emerging on an intangible horizon. They will never serve as legal evidence, nor provide answers about past atrocities. Yet, despite these limitations, imaginary documents help us to both broaden our definition of human rights documentation to include the affective needs of survivors and victims' families and to reconceptualize archives as institutions that can make meaning out of past atrocity when legal systems are unable to or are perceived to fail to administer justice (Caswell and Gilliland 2015).

In further contemplating this phenomenon within the contexts of our individual research related to human rights and post-conflict recovery, we speculated about whether it might be possible to delineate the distinctions between actualized and imagined records as these might exist independently of or in opposition or apposition to each other. We also looked to what seemed to us to be similar or related phenomena being raised, theorized and debated in recent cultural studies, especially feminist and post-colonial literary and historical scholarship. While distinct, these areas (i.e., human rights research, activism and cultural studies) share some similar preoccupations with the instruments and artifacts of power structures—including recordkeeping and archives—and associated issues of absence and aspiration that seem so often to be present when impossible archival imaginaries are exercised and imagined records are at work. We also wondered if theoretical substantiation of the phenomena of impossible archival imaginaries and imagined records might provide a new dialectic, or at least a fertile nexus for discussion between archival theory and practice, human rights research and

activism, and wider disciplinary and cultural understandings of the record, evidence, the archive and archival affect.

Theories of the imaginary

Arjun Appadurai, whose work on the social imaginary is increasingly cited in the archival literature, has observed that:

The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life... The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global processes: *the imagination as a social practice*... The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a global fact, and is the key component of the new global order (1996, p. 31).

Fellow anthropologist Claudia Strauss further observes that, “*Imaginary* is becoming common in the place of *culture* and *cultural beliefs, meanings, and models* in anthropology and cultural studies” (2006, p. 322). She delineates how the term has been understood in many different ways—for example, as a culture’s ethos (Costoriadis), as an illusion and a fantasy (Lacan), and as a cultural model (Anderson and Taylor) (Strauss 2006, p. 323); and with different imaginers in mind—a particular society or group, a nation, a community or an individual. Such persistent and disciplinarily diverse foci on the imaginary not only provide validation for its existence and influence in different spheres, but also suggest a variety of ways to define it and identify its presence and effects in relation to records and archives. While Strauss argues that the concept could certainly be traced back to Marx, and the influence of Marxism can be traced forward through the work of Costoriadis, Anderson and others, it is French novelist and essayist André Gide, known for his sophisticated work on the human condition and rhetorical style, who is credited with first taking the adjective *imaginaire* (imagined or imaginary) and using it in his work as a noun (imaginary). In perhaps his most famous work, *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*, 1925), Gide eschews the usual omniscience of the author and requires his readers to keep shifting their judgments as they are presented with multiple distinct voices and points of view. A more direct treatment of the imaginary, and one more directly applicable to the phenomenon that we identified in our work, can be found in the work of philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre, himself strongly influenced by Gide. Sartre’s 1940 treatise on the imaginary life, *L’Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l’imagination* (*The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*), discusses how we treat imaginary objects as if they are real and ascribe all sorts of affects, beliefs and characteristics to them. Sartre identifies four features of imaginative consciousness that distinguish the imaginary from perception and conceptual thought: it is a consciousness that makes present through reflection something absent; it is quasi-observed (i.e., it is imagined in its entirety); it posits its object as nothingness—it could be nonexistent, absent, existing elsewhere, or neither existing or nonexistent; and it is spontaneous (Sartre 2002, pp. 141–155; Levy 2012). Sartre extends this

argument into his larger ideas of existentialism in his 1944 play *Huit Clos* [*No Exit*] and his *Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* [*Being and Nothingness* (2001)]. His argument that because we can imagine, we are ontologically free rather than fatalistically “trapped” (1989) in the real, is potentially particularly useful in the contexts of archival work with regard to human rights, activism and post-conflict recovery (Gilliland 2015).

The psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan successively unfolded three imbricated notions—the imaginary, the symbolic and the real (which, he argued, the first two served to obscure)—that structure and situate the individual psyche. Lacan invokes theories of media and communication, and also the continual negotiation that takes place between one’s internal and external world. To Lacan the imaginary was an internalized image of an ideal or whole. Although fictive, the imaginary could have very real effects as the site of identification. In his *Écrits* (2007), Lacan describes the mirror stage as the moment when a child sees himself or herself in a mirror for the first time and interprets and internalizes the image of the coherent unified body. Through the internalization of this image, the child enters the imaginary order with the formation of the Ideal-I or ideal ego (Lacan 2007). Additionally, it is in this stage where the child recognizes himself or herself as separate from the mother, which is the fundamental “lack” that prompts the human subject to seek out (but never attain) fulfillment or satisfaction of that lack.

Greek-French philosopher, economist and social theorist Cornelius Castoriadis argued that change emerges through *the* social imaginary, which he saw as a unifying ethos across society, rather than as a multiplicity of different imaginaries, that challenges existing determinations such as physicalism and logicism, causalism and finalism (1975, p. 108). Castoriadis’ work on social imaginaries, however, does not have as much purchase in the archival field as that of Benedict Anderson, Charles Taylor and Appadurai. Political scientist Anderson conceives of the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1983, p. 15). He describes a “framework of a new consciousness” (p. 38) which cannot be formed within existing regimes and ideologies and which, Strauss argues, fits cognitive anthropologists’ “conception of cultural models, which are similarly shared, implicit schemas of interpretation, rather than explicit ideologies, although cultural models can derive from or be the source of explicit ideologies” (2006, p. 329). Anderson provides an example of such nationalist imaginaries at work within the context of memorialization, and by implication, the shaping of national identity and narratives:

No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has no true precedents in earlier times. To feel the force of this modernity one has only to imagine the general reaction to the busy-body who “discovered” the Unknown Soldier’s name or insisted on filling the cenotaph with some real bones. Sacrilege of a strange, contemporary kind! Yet void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly national

imaginings. (This is why so many different nations have such tombs without feeling any need to specify the nationality of their absent occupants. What else could they be but Germans, Americans, Argentinians...?) (1983, p. 50).

Philosopher Charles Taylor, who has noted the influence of Anderson's work on his own, defines the social imaginary as "not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society" (2002, p. 91). His argument resonates with long-standing tensions in the archival field between different conceptions of records and their authoritativeness in bureaucratic and other cultural and community settings and whether their bases lie in legal codification, archival theory, professional practice or common practice and understanding. He writes,

I speak of imaginary because I'm talking about the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends. But it is also the case that theory is usually the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy... (2002, p. 106).

Taylor posits that this common understanding is both "'factual' and normative" and also involves a social awareness of what might invalidate those common practices, and it is a reminder to archivists that they do not control wider understandings of either "the archive/archives" or "[the] record" (p.106).

In a feminist historian's take on the concept of the imaginary, Chicana scholar Emma Pérez argues that what is known about the Chicano past is a direct result of "the colonial imaginary," that is, ways of seeing, organizing and knowing the world that have been externally imposed by structures of power (1999, p. 3). Instead, she advocates for the disruption of such a trajectory through "the decolonial imaginary," a psychic space of personal and community empowerment rooted in the creation of what Pérez terms "third space feminist critique" (p. 125). For Pérez, the imaginary can be harnessed as a tool of oppression or as a tool of liberation.

Strauss, in her review of scholarship addressing imaginaries, adds a few cautions. First, it is important to ask "Whose imaginary is this?" She argues that it is important to take a person-centered approach and to be careful to examine real imaginaries of real, rather than of imagined, people so that it is possible to discern heterogeneity and fluidity within an imaginary. Second, she argues that one must be careful to recognize the complexities of individuals' psychology (including their inner lives) and public culture and the interactions or relationships between the two. Thirdly, and this gets to the heart of the phenomenon of the imagined record, she states that there is a need:

...to provide some of the psychological theory missing in terms, such as the imaginary, that are implicitly psychological. "Imaginary" suggests a more interesting form of cognition than knowledge of perceptible facts. Psychologists, psychoanalysts, and psychological anthropologists have delineated a variety of forms of cognition and awareness between knowledge of

indisputable facts and complete lack of knowledge. These include explicit knowledge of imagined facts, implicit cultural beliefs, and dissociated, repressed, and fantasized knowledge, as well as experiences that are not internalized because they cannot be assimilated to any previous schema (Strauss 2006, p. 339).

Impossible archival imaginaries

Caswell, in her work on community archives, has recently introduced the notion of the *archival imaginary* in a way that accommodates the psychological aspects that Strauss raises while firmly situating the imaginary within the archival realm. She defines it as:

...the dynamic way in which communities creatively and collectively re-envision the future through archival interventions in representations of the shared past. Through the archival imaginary, the past becomes a lens to the future; the future is rooted in that which preceded it. Through the archival imaginary, the future can be conceived through kernels of what was possible in the past (Caswell 2014).

The notion of *impossible* archival imaginaries introduces an additional component to Caswell's definition while also drawing upon elements present in prior conceptualizations of imaginaries—it explains how archival imaginaries may work in situations where the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable. Unlike Ketelaar's "tacit narratives," which he argues reside within archival fonds, archival documents, archival institutions, and archival systems and "must be deconstructed in order to understand the meanings of archives" (2001, p. 131), such imaginaries are archivally impossible in the sense that they will never result in actualized records in any traditional sense, although they may exist in some kind of co-constitutive relationship with actualized records. Impossible archival imaginaries can be discerned at both psychological and social levels through personal, community, national and societal imaginings. These imaginings may be generated not only individually by scholars, filmmakers, novelists and artists, and grieving mothers of stillborn children (Douglas 2015), but also, more collectively by nationalists, fervent believers, Indigenous peoples whose history and memory has been obliterated through colonialism and Western information practices (Duarte and Belarde-Lewis 2015), and victims of state-sponsored crimes or bureaucratic violence among others. If instantiated, they may take various media forms, including fiction, film and performance. They can provide a trajectory to the future out of a particular perspective on the past and may build upon either actual or imagined documentation and narratives. At the same time, they can be complex and dynamic, shifting along what Gilliland (2015b) has identified as a "continuum of recordkeeping affect" as internal emotions and external circumstances change and interact.

In the rest of this section, we offer, in brief, a few examples that illustrate some of ways in which impossible archival imaginaries have surfaced or been manifested. Affect can be an elusive entity to identify empirically and so we have provided the readers with the authors' own words (also in subsequent sections), since to summarize them would be to remove the very affective aspects that we are seeking to expose. In these examples, we can discern several affective threads: distrust of authority and of the archive, misplaced trust in artifacts (in this case visual media) that appear to represent reality, belief in what cannot be substantiated and disbelief in what can, fear of what might be in the archives as well as frustration with what is not, and sometimes the aspiration to recover what is absent from the archive.

The first example is not dissimilar to the one offered by Dever and also illustrates not only how imaginaries can form and the pressure that they can bring to bear on actual archival institutions and records policy, but also how difficult archives may find it to refute the imagined records that have been created by such an imaginary. In the United States, popular and scholarly speculation over the bungled investigation and contents of classified US government records relating to the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy grew to the point where the US Congress and the National Archives felt compelled to respond, resulting in the passage of the unprecedented President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 (JFK Act). The act mandated that all records concerned with the death of the President be housed together at the US National Archives and that an independent Assassination Records Review Board be created to "re-examine for release the assassination-related records that federal agencies still regarded as too sensitive to open to the public" (National Archives n.d.). However, even though the legislation led to more systematic archival control over the records and their release, certain documents have remained closed, thus continuing to contribute to speculation and conspiracy theories (Bender 2013).

Two other important aspects have bolstered the social imaginary in this case. The first is the 26-second-long two-part 8 mm home movie shot by Abraham Zapruder, a co-owner of a local dress-manufacturing company, copies of which were taken as evidence by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Secret Service. After the alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was murdered in an act of vigilantism by Jack Ruby while Oswald was being transferred to the county jail, the Zapruder film assumed additional significance:

In the absence of a cathartic, public trial in Dallas, the Zapruder film displaced Oswald's view from the sixth-floor window; a partial but mesmerizing visual record had to stand in for seeing the assassination through Oswald's eyes, and hearing it described in his words. The assassination, in fact, was becoming "fused with one representation, so much so that Kennedy's death became virtually unimaginable without Zapruder's film," as the critic Richard B. Woodward put it in 2003 (Holland 2014).

The second is the influential role played by director Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* in shaping conceptions of events surrounding the assassination for many Americans, especially for those who were not born at the time or were too young to remember it and its aftermath firsthand:

Filmed in a grainy semi-documentary style, with newsreels as well as amateur footage incorporated into it, “JFK” purports to reveal the actual truth about the Kennedy Assassination...Oliver Stone, fabricated for his film the crucial evidence and witnesses that were missing in real life—even when this license required deliberately falsifying reality and depicting events that never happened (Epstein 1993).

In other words, in part because of public suspicion that the government remains intent on withholding key evidence, and in part because of the compelling nature of film as a medium (both as record and as fiction) as well as the director’s vision as reflected in *JFK* as a work, imagined accounts of what actually happened will likely continue to wield influence even after all the classified records are eventually made publicly available.

Those who have suffered under an elected government or military dictatorial regime form other kinds of group and individual imaginaries about the nature and content of the archive. Anthropologist Susan Slyomovics, writing of her interviews in connection with Morocco’s Equity and Reconciliation Commission, observes two contradictory discourses, one relating to the “occluding” of an existing archive and one relating to an archive that exists only in the imaginary:

... many former political prisoners, subjected to disappearance, torture and illegal imprisonment, conjure up with certitude a vast secret police archive that collects their books, tracts, journals, photos, political posters and more, materials confiscated once they were in under investigation and in custody. Stolen artifacts are warehoused somewhere they claim, practices consistent with French surveillance techniques by a colonial regime intent on monitoring and eradicating Moroccan dissidence. One day, they believe these treasures will come to light. Whenever fires are reported in various ministries or police precincts, these events are routinely construed as their rulers and enforcers ridding themselves of incriminating documents. A second discourse by some human rights workers nullifies this implacable belief in an imaginary archive by pointing either to the disorganized nature of paperwork in most Moroccan bureaucracies or a more sinister reasoning in which oral, not written commands are characteristic of repressive regimes intent on eliminating written records delineating the extent of torture and extra-judicial executions (Slyomovics 2015).

With echoes of both Foucault and Deleuze, Kirsten Thorpe also addresses this certitude among victims about the existence of an archive that was never created. She discusses how, sometimes accompanied by the realization that records that once existed and might have helped them have been irrecoverably lost (often through deliberate destruction), it can evoke significant affect on the part of individuals, communities or groups who have suffered because of recordkeeping practices. This is because they have *imagined* the contents of those records as well as the power and instrumentality that they represent. Reflecting on when she worked as Archivist—Aboriginal Liaison assisting Australian Aboriginal people in gaining access to the New South Wales (NSW) State Records Office and negotiating appropriate access

to records relating to them, their families and communities that were created by the NSW Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards, she reflects:

I recall situations where clients were deeply afraid of accessing their records since the Board [sic] had threatened them that deeply personal information had been recorded about their personal lives, only to find out that no such information was captured. In other cases, clients visiting the archives were shocked to find that no records existed that documented themselves or their families' contact with the Board (Thorpe 2015).

In a very different vein, David Kim's study of the archives held by the Roswell UFO Museum in New Mexico in the United States draws our attention to the ways in which the imaginary of the UFOlogy community involves creating an archive that is documenting what that community profoundly wishes and believes to be the case (Kim 2014). The archive's contents range from testimonials, media coverage and scientific research to Hollywood representations and mythology. Kim argues that categories of the "unknown" and the "unidentified" in UFOlogy generate affective responses that are expressed as knowledge and perhaps even as evidence when scientifically verifiable evidence is not available. Among the affects that he identifies are paranoia, victimhood, curiosity and wonder as well as both utopia and dystopia as these are projected onto the category of the "unidentified." He notes that when the scientific method fails and when attempts at government transparency also fail, UFOlogy turns to other epistemologies and promotes a phenomenological understanding of archives—namely acknowledging that evidence is not always understandable or legible and accordingly shifting the parameters of the archive in relationship to objects that serve as evidence.

Another example of a community-generated impossible archival imaginary is centered around the Cooper's Donuts riot of 1959, an incident in which transgender individuals in downtown Los Angeles played a major part in fighting back against a police raid. The Cooper's Donuts riot preceded by a decade the Stonewall riots in New York City that are often seen to be a watershed in gay liberation in the United States. However, since almost no documentation appears to have survived and indeed until recently few dedicated transgender archives existed, the event, while increasingly referenced and imaginatively represented in the trans community as one of its foundational "records," has all but disappeared from the wider public memory. Instead Stonewall is often thought of today as the first major instance in the United States where the queer community fought back against officially sanctioned persecution. Nevertheless, the Cooper's Donuts event and its traces remain in the archival imaginary of the transgender community as a defining moment in its existence. This example also points to absences in the societal archival imaginary regarding the role played by Los Angeles in the early stages of the formation of American identity politics around gender and sexuality, for example, by the Mattachine Society's early meetings in "the Red Hills of Edendale" (today, Silver Lake and Echo Park) pre-World War II (Hurewitz 2008).

As this last example might suggest, impossible archival imaginaries are, more often than not, associated with imagined records, and we encounter many of the same affective threads when we look at examples of imagined records. However,

imagined records can also be associated with archival imaginaries that are not necessarily impossible. Our analysis suggests that they are most likely to occur under particular circumstances: when expected evidence does not exist, is not available or is insufficient to achieve a desired outcome; when there are different or contested interpretations of the same acts or evidence; or when the official evidentiary infrastructures and interpretations are not trusted, especially highly charged cases such as those pertaining to violations of human rights. They are also associated with differing imagined trajectories of the future. In the following sections, we first look at how imagined records can be “created” and their relationships to archival imaginaries, and then at ways in which they can be “located” or “uncovered.”

Creating imagined records

In this section, we highlight some contemporary examples in which affected communities have conjured up (or are still in the process of conjuring up) records that, while not actually existing, meet pressing social needs in the present. In the first case—the nonexistent video footage of Michael Brown’s murder—the imagined record serves to instantiate the possibility of a justice that has not yet arrived. In the second set of cases—records invented by refugees to secure status as citizens—the imagined record offers hope of a stable future. Across these cases, imagined records engender the possibility not only of survival but also of security, despite the precariousness of lived reality.

The recent debate in the United States over police body cameras reveals a popular instantiation of the imagined record phenomenon with the power to engender widespread political mobilization. On August 9, 2014, police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri. In the immediate aftermath of Brown’s murder, many—including Brown’s parents—called on the police to wear body cameras in order to create photographic evidence that could hold law enforcement officials accountable. At Brown’s funeral, his parents’ lawyer told reporters:

Even though we buried Michael Brown today, his life will continue to live on in the fight to change the system of how we get transparency... This is how we pay our final respects to Michael Brown, Jr., by passing statutes to get mandatory body cameras and mandatory dash cam videos for every police department in the United States (Alcindor 2014).

The family’s call for police body cameras intensified after a grand jury failed to indict Officer Wilson. In a November 2014 statement, Brown’s mother, Lesley McSpadden, and his father, Michael Brown Sr., reiterated, “Join with us in our campaign to ensure that every police officer working the streets in this country wears a body camera” (McSpadden and Brown 2014a). In December of that same year, Brown’s parents launched a petition on Change.org calling for legislation that would provide \$263 million in federal funding to equip local police departments

across the country with body cameras. In the petition, McSpadden and Brown explicitly linked the lack of photographic evidence with the failure to indict:

Many questions remain about what happened leading up to the moment when our son was shot. But had Officer Darren Wilson been wearing a body camera, which are being worn by more and more police departments around the country, there would be no questions (McSpadden and Brown 2014b).

In this case, Brown's grieving parents had created an imagined record—footage from Darren Wilson's nonexistent body camera—and imbued that imagined record with the capability to establish irrefutable evidence of the truth of their son's murder. If the police were wearing body cameras, if photographic records had been created, we are also led to imagine, the grand jury would have indicted Wilson, and justice would have been served. Furthermore, with calls to pass what is now known as the Michael Brown, Jr. Law, the imagined record of Brown's murder becomes one of countless imagined records like it, as communities across the country are invited to imagine all of the records that should-have-been and now-can-be created of police brutalizing black bodies. The petition continues:

Police departments are already using on-body cameras with amazing success. In the first year after the Rialto Police Department in California adopted the cameras in 2012, the number of complaints filed against officers fell by 88 percent compared with the last year. More importantly, the use of force by officers fell by almost 60 percent (McSpadden and Brown 2014b).

Here we have a new category of imagined record, the record that need-not-be-created because its very possibility prevents the brutality of its creation. Imagined records in this context thus become a force for political change, moving the public into collective action in support of the proposed legislation.

Yet, at virtually the same time that Brown's parents sought to mobilize the public to demand the actualization of heretofore only imagined records, we were inundated with actually existing video records of police brutalizing other black bodies: Eric Garner being choked by a New York Police Department (NYPD) officer as recorded by a bystander on a cell phone-generated video, and 12-year-old Tamir Rice being shot by Cleveland police as caught on surveillance footage from a nearby recreation center. In the case of Garner, however, the existence and mass circulation of such photographic video-recorded evidence had little effect in the courtroom since a grand jury also failed to indict the officer responsible. In this case, an actually existing record of Garner's murder proved to have little power to enact justice. Nevertheless, the nonexistent imagined record of Brown's murder has an envisioned aspirational trajectory, advancing well beyond the specificities of the Brown case, to bring about a more just future.

Writing about the ways in which a jury interpreted video footage of the 1991 beating by Los Angeles police of African American civilian Rodney King following a high-speed car chase, cultural studies theorist Judith Butler posits that audiences viewed such evidence through a racialized field of vision, that is, "the visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (1993, p. 17). In other words, white audiences have been

taught to see differently than black audiences—where white audiences see a threatening black criminal justly being contained, black audiences see several towering white officials mercilessly beating a cowering black body. As cultural studies scholar Nikki Sullivan writes, “‘matter’ is inextricable from the I/eye that perceives it: perception makes ‘matter’ matter” (2012, p. 300). Who you are determines how you read the evidence; the footage does not “speak for itself.” Such claims echo archival conceptualizations of evidence as never existing in and of itself, but rather, always needing to be activated in support of an argument (Ketelaar 2001). In such a reading, what is needed to enact justice for Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice and countless others, and to prevent future acts of brutality, is not more evidence attained through imagined records, but less racialized ways of viewing the records that *do* exist. As archivist Jarrett Drake notes:

... the presence of cameras on cops doesn’t address the elephant in the room that would actually *deter* officers from executing civilians in the streets: accountability... Documentation is impotent if policies, procedures, and processes don’t exist to guarantee its utility... The historical record is abundant yet the accountability is wanting (2014).

Drake concludes:

The first act of violence in American policing is the deprivation of life of a citizen whose humanity is allegedly protected and served by his assailant. To the extent that cop cameras can reduce these occurrences, I support them. But outfitting cops with cameras won’t solve the second and more egregious act: the unabated impunity of those responsible, a reality not much different in effect than the lawlessness of lynching in the Jim Crow south. Without meaningful processes for redress, a cop-camera video of an officer killing an unarmed civilian is nothing more than the 0’s and 1’s of an .mp4 file. As an archivist I can assure you that over time the bits of that file will erode, and right along with it will be any semblance of accountability in American policing (2014).

As calls for police body cameras emerged even in the face of the futility of video footage of Garner’s murder, we see two conflicting views of records: a positivist faith in the evidentiary capability of now-only-imagined records in the Brown case and the utter evidentiary failure of existing records in the Garner case. Ironically, the imagined records come to embody the justice that has proven to be unattainable through the actual records—a situation not dissimilar to that which we had identified with the cases of Ieng Sary and Slobodan Milošević.

How does one create a record that enables one not only to narrate one’s prior life, but also to move toward a future, a better one, when no actual prior record exists? This is a very real dilemma faced by refugees all over the world, and one which compellingly calls for a better understanding and accommodation of the co-constitution and differing agencies of the real and the imaginary, and the instantiated and the imagined by the archival community (Halilovich 2013; Gilliland and Halilovich 2015). Vietnamese American author and correspondent Andrew Lam writes of the “stories” and testimonies recited to officials or written

down by refugees from the Vietnam War in refugee camps in Hong Kong facing forced repatriation in order to try to persuade the authorities that they should be among the fewer than eight percent deemed eligible for political asylum. Rarely able to produce official records about their previous lives to support their cases, “Stories are all that refugees possess—all that stand between their freedom and forced repatriation” (Lam 2005, p. 71). Ironically, as Lam notes, these stories and testimonies, if they weren’t “good enough” to achieve this task and the refugees were repatriated to Vietnam, in their actualized form would be “counted as evidence against the state, reasons enough for imprisonment or worse. Vietnam was the only country willing to use the boat people’s biographies verbatim against them” (p. 88). As with the prior discussion of police violence and the record-creating potential of police body cameras, records—real or imagined—are only as good as the collective will to read them as evidence in support of just causes.

In her ethnographic study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, anthropologist Liisa Malkki describes a different situation: how “the management of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other signs and symptoms of naturalized identity [e.g., claiming to be a Muslim or intermarriage with Tanzanians] obviated the need for refugee identification cards as well as a Tanzanian passport” (1995, p. 170). In this case, refugees, local Tanzanian residents (who did not all have official citizenship documentation themselves), government immigration agents and the U.N. High Commission for Refugees all participate in a system of ad hoc naturalization that in effect creates an imagined record of citizenship or naturalization status. Malkki writes, “If the use of a given identity was convincing, if it worked, its user was in effect taken to be a citizen” (p. 171). In some cases, refugees found that combining both actual and imagined records of naturalization status proved to be the most effective strategy, which would also suggest that “real” and “imagined” records are not always in opposition or apposition to each other. Rather, as the UFO Museum archive example also suggested, they are co-constitutive of a desired documentary and phenomenological reality. The results of this co-constitution are the stuff of Caswell’s archival imaginary, not of impossibility, but of possibility, as well as the imbrication of the two. To use Lam’s words, “Precious things lost are transmutable. They refuse oblivion. They simply wait to be rendered into testimonies, into stories and songs” (2005, p. 2), and sometimes these imagined records are actually accorded the authority necessary to make the archival imaginary possible.

Locating or uncovering imagined records

The urge to invoke an imagined document or record where none exists has been well articulated by feminist scholars, particularly those whose work focuses on subaltern subjects whose voices are absent from archival records. For many of these scholars, the absence of marginalized voices in the archive—the fact that it was almost always the colonist, the slave master, the industrialist and the male who had the literacy, the power and the privilege to leave behind lasting traces—has induced a type of “archival aporia,” making it impossible to write histories of the subaltern

within the confines of dominant epistemological discourses that demand written evidence to prove the past's existence (Arondekar 2009, p. 1).

Recently, a few scholars have attempted to break out of these standard epistemological constraints by suggesting both new imagined forms of archival evidence and new relationships between archival evidence and the construction of knowledge, and how to locate and uncover them. Saidiya Hartman, a scholar of English literature whose work focuses on the transatlantic slave trade, asks the question, "...how does one tell impossible stories?" (2008, p. 10). In her essay "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman resurrects the character of Venus, a composite stand-in for the thousands of enslaved women briefly or incidentally mentioned in the records of their masters. The essay, which serves as a sort of confessional companion to Hartman's monograph *Lose Your Mother* (2007), allows Hartman to voice her frustrations at the standard conventions of historical scholarship, which make telling Venus's story in any detail an impossibility. She notes:

Admittedly, my own writing is unable to exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive. It depends upon the legal records, surgeons' journals, ledgers, ship manifests, and captains' logs, and in this regard falters before the archive's silence and reproduces it[s] omissions. The irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade resides precisely in all the stories that we cannot know and that will never be recovered (Hartman 2008, p. 12).

In a wistful moment of self-critique, Hartman confesses that in the face of the existing record, "I feared what I might invent...If I could have conjured up more than a name in an indictment, if I could I have imagined Venus speaking in her own voice..." (p. 8). If she had done so, then perhaps Hartman could have shattered the aporia of the extant archive. And yet Hartman's work suggests a new way forward—rather than rely solely on the traces of the powerful, Hartman suggests that we "exceed...the constitutive limits of the archive" through the process of "critical fabulation" (p. 11). Through critical fabulation, Hartman seeks both to disrupt the authority of existing evidence and "to imagine what might have happened to might have been said or might have been done" (p.11). In this way, the figure of Venus becomes the author of a new, impossible and imagined archive, one in which she can tell her own story in her own voice. Thus even as Hartman laments the absence of a single autobiographical account of the Middle Passage by an enslaved woman, she simultaneously conjures up such an account as an imagined record authored by an imagined Venus that fills a crucial gap in the historical narrative. Here, the limits of the archive point to the current constraints (and future possibilities) of records as evidence; if Venus's imaginary narrative can be willed into existence, Hartman seems to ask, can't it also serve as evidence?

Feminist scholar Anjali Arondekar pursues a similar interrogation, but unlike Hartman, Arondekar insists on the productivity of archival absences *as* absences. In "Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive" (2005, p. 11), she notes that:

Scholarship in South Asia, in particular, has recast the colonial archive as a site of endless promise, where new records emerge daily and where accepted wisdom is both entrenched and challenged. In some ways, these archival

expansions resemble the contours of the earlier canon wars in literary studies, as they question received notions of proof, evidence, and argumentation, particularly in fields involving historical inquiry.

Arondekar raises the limits of the archive—in this case the apparent “evidentiary paradox” wherein popular knowledge about the prevalence of “unnatural sexual conduct” (i.e., homosexuality) fails to be documented in the colonial archive. In her search for traces of sexuality in the British colonial records of South Asia, she questions the attempts of her peers to uncover, collect and reclaim records created by subaltern subjects. This obsession with finding and reading imagined documents not previously accessible in archives, Arondekar suggests in *For the Record*, is a motion toward a “recuperative hermeneutics” that, while seeking to uncover subaltern histories, undergirds the epistemological system that dictates their silence (2009, p. 1). She asks not that we imagine documents that don’t exist, but that we imagine new possibilities in their absence. “What if the recuperative gesture returns us to a space of absence? How then does one restore absence to itself? Put simply, can an empty archive also be full?” (p.1). For Arondekar, the solution is not more records—real or imagined—but more creative ways of reading the elisions evident in such records. However, faced with feminist attempts to reclaim historical subjects through imagined records, Arondekar offers up instead imagined meanings in absences. It is a move that insists yet again on an imagined trajectory of records. “The archive still promises,” Arondekar asserts (p.1).

In both fiction and creative nonfiction relating to diasporas of the past 150 years, photographs, real, imagined or lost but still residing in the liminal space of memory between the real and the imagined are frequent tropes (Gilliland and Halilovich 2015). However, we can see the same interplay in scholarly accounts. Writing of his project to use different media to trace the Indian diaspora, yet another endeavor that speaks to the paucity of extant archival content, media scholar and filmmaker Vivek Bald concludes by reflecting on the story that led him to develop the project. It was told to him by East Harlem actor, comedian and playwright Alaudin Ullah, of his father, a former seaman from what today is Bangladesh who arrived in New York in the 1920s:

In all of this, Alaudin Ullah has been guided by a photograph. This one is not in his mother’s albums but is clear in his own memory. He saw the photograph as a child, in the early 1970s, he thinks in the apartment of Ibrahim Choudry. The photograph is of Choudry and Malcolm X standing together, amid a group of other African American and South American Muslims. Alaudin has been trying for years to locate this image, which may now simply be the fading memory of a snapshot that no longer exists. As he keeps searching, he is driven by more than just fact that the photograph might link one of his father’s close friends to a larger-than-life figure of African American history. For Alaudin, this image stands for a past of which his father was a part—a past of everyday crossings and affiliations that, for this brief moment captured in a photograph, suggested the possibility of larger political solidarities. The image represents an idea that in the give-and-take of daily life, the experience of encountering, living among, and even conflicting with one another might lead

different groups toward new understandings of community, shared struggle, and shared purpose. This is another reason the histories of South Asian peddlers and seamen are significant—not for the hidden pasts they reveal but for the possible futures that are connected to those pasts. These are the stakes of loss. It may be important to Alaudin Ullah that he finds the lost photograph, but it is just as important for us to picture the future of community, solidarity, and inclusion that the image represents to him, and which was possible, however briefly, in the lives of men and women who are now gone (Bald 2013, pp. 228–229).

This case of the absent Malcolm X photograph points to an impossible imaginary both in the sense that a nonexistent record cannot be archived, and in the sense that, rather than serve as evidence of a past event, the imagined record anchors and projects new possible futures, futures which are foreclosed in the absence of the material artifact. At stake is not just an understanding of history, but a trajectory for the future; the imagined record instantiates collective aspiration for not just what was, but what is and what will be possible.

Records, which are the preoccupation of archival theory and practice, are classically and formally understood as the by-products, essence or other forms of documentation of actions or acts that are evaluated, valued and employed according to legal, administrative and historical constructions of evidence (i.e., they are probative, dispositive, narrative or supporting with regard to an action or act) (Duranti et al. 2002). On the other hand, the examples discussed here would suggest that imagined records are created through and to provide evidence of affective reactions to such actions and acts as well as to the absence of desired documentation about them. Because of their predominantly affective nature, imagined records can potentially be initiators of powerful and often spontaneous impulses and aspirations that are deployed in situations where the legal, administrative or historical records and their interpretations are deemed by the imaginer to be erroneous or to have failed and justice has not been served. In some cases, actual and imagined records confront each other with alternate realities, one representing “the establishment” and the other, disaffection with or opposition to the establishment. In others, they interact in ways that co-constitute new realities or open up new possible futures. There are times also when imaginary records are used by people to justify their own behaviors all the while fully aware that the existence of the records is only imagined, or when people do not actually wish closed records to be opened because this might disappoint or undermine strongly held beliefs.

Conclusion

Mitigating the undesirable affects and effects of impossible archival imaginaries and imagined records and promoting the beneficial possibilities that they offer necessitate an implemented as well as a theoretical openness to alternate constructions of the nature and authoritativeness of the record and explicit consideration of the nature and role of affect. A willingness to critique and

challenge that record in action in current and past judicial and bureaucratic activities in ways that will support the counterbalances that the notions offer is also necessary. In this paper, we have pointed to ways in which archives fall short of these necessities. Our examples pinpoint moments in which actually extant records disappoint the expectations or fail to meet the needs of feminist and diaspora scholars, refugees, grieving families, transgender activists and believers in extraterrestrial life forms. In light of these record-failures, such actors have conjured up impossible records, never-to-materialize, but pregnant with the possibility of establishing a proof, a perspective, a justice that heretofore has remained unattainable. Thus, while such records do not actually exist, their weight, as manifestations of affect, as symbols of collective grief and aspiration, as evidence of the capacity of records to imagine impossible futures, is immeasurable, even to the point where for individuals, communities and even society at large, the truth as perceived and internalized may live in the affect rather than in the fact.

Given their importance, we argue that archival theory and practice can no longer afford to ignore such phenomena of the imagination. For archival theory, this means complicating the link between record and event in order to accommodate records collectively conjured by affect rather than created by event. Such accommodation to archival theory problematizes dominant conceptions of evidence and undermines the supremacy of epistemologies that imbue actually extant records with the sole authority to establish facts about the past. This conceptual move opens up archival thinking to nondominant and pluralist epistemologies. It also opens up another possible conversation—about the relationship between affect and effect—can an imagined record, conjured up in affect, have an effect? We would argue, in line with Taylor’s notion of a shared sense of legitimacy that it certainly can. If so, this has bearing on how we think about authenticity with regard to records and their ability to achieve their intended effect. Gilliland (2014) has discussed the use of altered, forged or someone else’s identity documentation by those seeking to flee the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. In the ability of these documents to achieve the purposes to which they were being put, she argued that they were authentic as to deployment:

This reality—that in crisis or desperation, people will act upon documentation expeditiously or emotionally, whether or not that documentation can be proved to be “truthful” or “reliable”—de-stabilizes and de-privileges classic archival understandings of trustworthiness. In its place, it insists that an expanded contextual understanding of the act itself with which the record is associated be brought to bear in any archival value judgment or prioritization; and serves as a visceral reminder that a record that has been tampered with or used for a purpose other than that for which it was created is nevertheless authentic in relation to the purpose for which it was used to achieve (Gilliland 2014).

Could that argument be extended to imagined, non-actualized records? Ketelaar has similarly pointed out how tacit narratives “will be seen by some as a threat to traditional values [such] as authenticity, originality and uniqueness” but counters in an argument we might also apply to imagined records that:

the archive as “repository of meanings”, the multilayered, multifaceted meanings hidden in archivalization and archiving, ... can be deconstructed and reconstructed, then interpreted and used by scholars, over and over again. We read today other things in the archive, than the next generation will read, and so on ad infinitum (2001, p. 139).

For archival practice, considering imagined records means taking affect seriously (Gilliland 2014). In his essay, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” James O’Toole argues that to fulfill their role completely, archivists must understand as much as possible about the circumstances that produced records, and this includes their symbolic context and meaning (1993, p. 255). If we extend his argument to account for how affective aspects of various imaginaries and not only evidentiary concerns are shaping archives, then surely archivists should be taking into account the context and meaning of the imagined as well as what O’Toole refers to as the practical, utilitarian aspects of records and recordkeeping (viz., Lacan’s triad of imaginary, symbolic and real). Of course we cannot expect archivists, whose work is steeped in the material stuff of the past, to intervene directly in the immaterialities posed by imagined records. However, we can and should envision new ways that archival description, retrieval and use can be reworked to take absences—and their attending affects—into account, and in situations where our ethics and humanity demand it, striving to turn impossible archival imaginaries into possibilities. We must find better ways to engage collective imaginaries if the archival endeavor is to become relevant to communities disenfranchised by the extant record. The refugees, grieving families, transgender activists, believers in extraterrestrial life forms and feminist and diaspora scholars discussed in this article demand no less.

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