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"Handmaidens of history": speculating on the feminization of archival work

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Abstract

The figure of the handmaiden seems particularly resonant today, in part due to the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Activated simultaneously as a symbol of passivity and resistance, the handmaiden occupies a contradictory position within our present milieu. In the archival discipline, the metaphor of archivists as "handmaidens of history" emerged out of nineteenth-century characterizations of archival neutrality and persisted up until the 1980s. In contemporary practice, archivists are no longer considered passive stewards; rather, their work is understood to be inherently political and interventionist, and however, despite this critical paradigm shift, archival work is routinely feminized. Drawing from the feminist practice of "doing speculatively", I suggest that the metaphor of "the handmaiden" is an interesting point of entry for exploring how archival work, once considered mechanical, servile and invisible, has become powerful and disruptive, offering opportunities for political intervention and social change. This article positions the handmaiden as a discursive tool for telling stories about our profession and the many bodies—feminized and otherwise—who have built and continue to influence our field.

Keywords Feminization · Archival work · Speculative fabulation · Handmaidens of history · Professionalization · Archival histories

Introduction

> Just as patriarchy required women to be subservient, invisible handmaidens to male power, historians and other users of archives require archivists to be neutral, invisible, silent handmaidens of historical research (Cook 2007, p. 170).

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> We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories (Atwood 1985, p. 174).

The handmaiden figure occupies a contradictory place of servility and dissent within our present milieu; she is activated simultaneously as a symbol of passivity and resistance. Within the archival discipline, the metaphor of archivists as "handmaidens of history" emerged out of nineteenth-century characterizations of archival neutrality and persisted up until the 1980s (Cook 2007). In this context, archivists were positioned as "caretakers" who created "homes" for records (Kelly 2017). In contemporary practice, archivists are no longer considered passive stewards; rather, their work is understood to be inherently political and interventionist. However, despite this critical paradigm shift, archival work has been routinely feminized (Shepherd 2016; Caswell 2017; Dever 2017; Kelly 2017; Moravec 2017). The emergence of a strong body of feminist archival theory and research has played a pivotal role in revealing, confronting, and re-centring gendered assumptions of archival work. Nineteenth-century notions of archival care have been reclaimed by Caswell and Cifor (2016) who orient care and radical empathy as critical archival formations. Cowan and Rault (2014, 2018) advocate for expanded understandings of archival ethics that account for both the labour of being studied, and the intimate relations that form between people, alternative scenes and spaces, records, archivists, users and researchers. Brilmyer's (2018) work positions feminist disability studies discourse and methodologies firmly within the field of archival studies and, in doing so, centres archival description as a site of political possibility and transformation. Amongst archival scholars and practitioners committed to archival liberation, feminist approaches to archival practice provide a means of thinking about archival commitments differently; of moving from a legalistic rights-based framework to one that centres relationality and responsibility (Wood et al. 2014; Caswell and Cifor 2016).

Driven by concepts introduced and explored by these and other feminist scholars of the archive (Dever 2010, 2014, 2017; Caswell 2015; Chazan et al. 2015; Gilliland and Caswell 2016; Shepherd 2016; Cifor 2016, 2017; Cifor and Wood 2017; Kelly 2017; Moravec 2017), I suggest that the handmaidens metaphor becomes an interesting point of entry for exploring how archival work, once considered mechanical, servile and invisible, has become powerful and disruptive, offering opportunities for political intervention and social change. In his 2016 essay "The ox and the virgin" Tom Nesmith employs oft-cited archival metaphors to take up themes of gendered archival labour, neutrality, and passivity, and in many ways this piece is picking up where he left off; it is an exercise in "doing speculatively", of positioning the handmaiden as a discursive tool for telling stories about our profession and the many bodies—feminized and otherwise—who have built and continue to influence our field (Nesmith 2016).

The figure of the handmaid

> Dozens of women march in silence through a rainy cityscape. Heads bowed, dressed in red cloaks and white bonnets, it looks like a scene from Gilead, the theocratic patriarchy Margaret Atwood created in dystopian 1985 novel *The*

> *Handmaid's Tale*. But this is Buenos Aires. It is Wednesday, and the women involved are calling for abortion to be decriminalised in a country where complications arising from illegal abortion are a leading cause of maternal death (Bell 2018).

The figure of the handmaiden seems particularly resonant today, in part due to the television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Atwood's dystopian novel and its subsequent reworking into a television series has informed many of the critiques being levied against the US government as new policies strip women and other minoritized populations of their rights. In cities round the world women dressed as handmaidens have taken to the streets to march and agitate; the red cloaked figure synonymous with reproductive justice activism. Recent protests include one in Buenos Aires, Argentina in July, 2018 (Rey 2018) and another in San Francisco in August, 2018 (Dizikes 2018). The image of the handmaid has surfaced in pop culture form in varying ways over the years; in the 1999 film "Star wars: episode I The phantom menace", Queen Padmé Amidala is accompanied by a group of handmaidens who act as bodyguards and decoys, quietly but deftly ensuring her safety and freedom of movement. The handmaiden duties shift in each pop culture iteration; however, what sustains across media and form is the trope of the handmaid as passive, hooded, and demure while simultaneously disruptive, discontent, and powerful.

Backgrounding any discussion of "the handmaiden" is a consideration of its biblical roots. Here I draw from Elena Nicolaou's analysis of the Old Testament to lend context to the origins of the term. Nicolaou states:

> Back in the days of sanctioned polygamy, Rachel and Leah are sisters married to Jacob. Leah has no trouble having son after son, but her sister, Rachel — the woman whom Jacob loves — can't get pregnant. Rachel convinces Jacob to impregnate her handmaid, Bilhah, so Rachel can have children "through" her. Bilhah gives birth to two sons, and Rachel names them both. Notably, Bilhah's voice is never heard at any point in the Bible (Nicolaou 2017).

In addition to emphasizing the voicelessness associated with the handmaiden, this origin story points to the root of the handmaiden's purpose: to provide reproductive labour that preserves a patrilineal provenance. The handmaiden's body becomes a vessel for preserving and sustaining bloodlines, enabling and projecting a patriarchal futurity. The ways in which this reference has been carried forward into the archival profession and sustained well into the 1980s are reflected in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century belief that archivists were neutral and passive custodians whose work was merely mechanical and required no special skills (Cook 2007, p. 170). It is also indicative of the reproductive labour being undertaken by archivists who have been tasked with ensuring the preservation of a different sort of provenance, one not tied to bloodlines, but rather, bodies of records and their historical continuity.

There are indicators throughout history of the ways in which the archive and those working within it have been coded feminine through a language of sexual power and dominance. In her book "The gender of history", Bonnie Smith details a letter

written in 1828 by historian Leopold von Ranke to Bettina von Armin wherein he describes archival documents as "so many princesses, possibly beautiful, all under a curse and needing to be saved" (Smith 1998, p. 116). Cook states that "[Ranke] described an archival collection he was using as 'absolutely a virgin. I long for the moment I have access to her… whether she is pretty or not'" (Cook 2009, p. 506). As unsettling as these characterizations of the archive may seem, Smith suggests that Ranke was not alone in his depiction of archival records as embodying passive and virginal femininity, or indeed as being embodied period. She states:

> For Léon de Laborde, head of the French national archives under the second Empire, 'A library is something, archives are someone… a someone who lives and breathes.' Before professionalization, Laborde claimed, archives had been 'raped' and 'mutilated,' their 'arms and legs ripped apart,' their 'head' taken 'cruelly' away from the body (Smith 1998 p. 116).

Laborde's characterization of the archive as a person physically violated by unqualified caretakers—caretakers who severed body from limb, who "raped" and "mutilated"—effectively conjures the figure of the handmaiden. The handmaiden is summoned to put the body back together; she is tasked with preserving the sanctity of the record. Cook observes the obsessive fetishization of the archive, stating that in the nineteenth-century archives were depicted as "virginal territory" (Cook 2009, p. 506). He further notes: "One historian wondered how, in doing archival research, he could 'avoid being seduced, intoxicated, and bewitched'" by archival records (Cook 2009, p. 506). The need for historians who viewed their work as a scientific and masculine endeavour, "to have a non-problematic, pure, virginal archive, ready for the historian to discover and exploit, almost by definition required the archivist to be an invisible caretaker, a docile handmaiden, the harem-keeper of the documentary virgins" (Cook 2009, p. 507). In this context, the handmaiden figure enables a very specific form of receptibility; she exists to receive the historian, to render the archive enterable. The archive, its contents, and by association its keepers are positioned as sites to be dominated and sublimated. Regardless of gender, the archivist becomes valued for their perceived innate feminized qualities: passivity, invisibility and receptibility. And this is the definition of feminization I am working with: the ascription of perceived feminine qualities to a particular labour domain and the stratification of labour that results. Feminization also refers to the moment of influx when women enter a profession en masse; however, it is important to note that the archive was feminized long before a surge of female-identified workers entered the archival workforce.

There are a number of pop culture examples of archival work that highlight the feminization phenomenon. For example, the archival worker and the archive as a feminized space appear often in detective and police shows. In this context, the archive is mobilized as a form of banishment and emasculation. Watch closely and you will start to notice that in almost every show at some point in time a rogue detective or officer is relegated down to the basement archive/records repository to perform filing duty as a punishment for their hypermasculinity; for going "off-book", being disorderly, or not respecting the chain of command. Look no further than Lester Freeman's stint in the records department in season one of "The wire"

(Simon 2004). Or the season one episode of "Fargo" (Winant 2014) titled "The Heap" in which FBI special agents Pepper and Budge are demoted to the records office after they bungle a surveillance stake-out. The 2013 film "The secret life of Walter Mitty" (Stiller 2013) also portrays the archive as a closed-off feminized space, one that must ultimately be escaped in order for professional and personal fulfillment. The film depicts Ben Stiller as Walter Mitty, an archivist working in the photograph department of Time magazine. Although Walter Mitty does not call himself an "archivist" (he calls himself a "negative asset manager"), he is certainly undertaking archival duties. Walter Mitty is characterized by voicelessness, preferring to live a quiet but rich imaginative life that is ridiculed and questioned by his colleagues and family. In this context, "the archive" becomes a symbol for Mitty's inability to speak or be recognized; it is not until he breaks free of the archive to explore the "real" world that his daydreaming stops and he is able to vocalize himself to the woman he loves and to those in positions of power.

I mention these pop culture representations of the archive and their reliance on the archive as a symbol of emasculation and punishment in order to foreground how I am thinking about archival feminization. If the archive is a site of filing, organizing, and fastidious work, then those relegated to this space can do no real-world damage. Which is not to say that pop culture representations of archival work are without archival triumphs. Workers sidelined to the archive will uncover incriminating documents while putting away case files, they'll forge alliances with others, and they'll experience personal growth that will result in professional breakthrough. However, archival triumphs almost always result in exodus; they are the moments of clarity that enable those relegated to the archive to finally leave and rejoin the outside world where their actions have "real" consequences. There are so many moments of archival interaction in popular culture, I have surely only scratched the surface of its representation. However, I wanted to include these examples to emphasize how the ascription of perceived feminine qualities to archival work influences how our field is viewed by those on the outside—like filmmakers and writers—while simultaneously shaping conditions of possibility—for work, for interaction, and for recognition—for those of us on the inside.

Doing speculatively

> It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because of what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many (Atwood 1985, p. 144).

There has been a shift from thinking about the archivist as a caretaker, to thinking about the archivist as undertaking *acts of care*; a shift which positions care, not as inherent or biologically determined, but as an act of relationality, responsibility and resistance, a powerful feminist pivot introduced to the archival field by Caswell and Cifor's (2016) "feminist ethics of care" framework. The ethics of care

positions archivists as having an affective responsibility towards records, users and records subjects. Caswell notes that in a "field—such as archival studies—that has been construed, by those in other humanities disciplines, as predominantly female, professional (that is, not academic), and service-oriented, and as such, unworthy of engagement" (Caswell 2016, p. 2) reorienting care as a radical act is a means of positioning archival scholarship as feminist versus feminized. When care is detached from biological impulse and no longer located solely in the feminized body of "the archivist", it becomes a form of attentive relationality evoked through and by the many intersections of creators, subjects, communities, records, custodians, donors, researchers and archivists that constitute an archive. This relationality has always existed; however, feminist approaches to framing archival practice have brought it to the fore in ways that make it more scrutable. Feminist frameworks that centre relationality and care from scholars such as Barad (2007), Harding (2004a, b), Hooks (2004), Kumbier (2014) and Lorde (1988) compel us to tell archival stories, histories, and narratives differently in order to be attentive to the various relational forces that sustain archives.

One approach to building different narratives is through the process of speculative fabulation (Haraway 2016). Speculative fabulation or critical fabulation (Hartman 2008) troubles linear characterizations of the past by playing with and extending spatial and temporal boundaries. Toupin and Spideralex (2018) note that "doing speculatively is infrastructural as it allows for the circulation of ideas, fabulations and dreams among others", enabling reinterpretation or re-engagement with pasts and presents that are "rife with contradictions and tensions". Hartman (2008) articulates the concept of critical fabulation through her attempts to trouble and surface the life of a girl she refers to as Venus. Venus is a composite figure with a brief archival presence who comes to represent the lives of all the unnamed girls who were forced into slavery and transported across the ocean. The figure of Venus eludes representation while simultaneously standing in for all of the young black women murdered aboard trans-Atlantic slave ships. The paucity of records and the silence of the archive—which only mentions Venus' death in passing—necessarily provoke a different kind of "imagined archive" (Gilliland and Caswell 2016), one that shifts, troubles, and reconstitutes parts of Venus' story in order "to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (Hartman 2008, p. 11). Of critical fabulation Hartman states: "The intent of this practice is… to imagine what cannot be verified… and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance … It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive" (Hartman 2008, p. 13). Critical fabulation is in many ways rooted in longing and anticipation; not merely for better representations, but for better understanding that the archive is in many ways a false promise, it can never quite approximate that piece of the world it professes to capture.

Gilliland and Caswell (2016) invoke the idea of the imagined archive as a means of confronting and engaging with unattainable archives. The authors suggest that "records as imagined or anticipated can inspire all sorts of narratives, suppositions, aspirations, longings, fears and distrust" (2016, p. 55). Drawing from Hartman's

figure of Venus, the authors suggest that critical fabulation enables Venus to become "the author of a new, impossible and imagined archive, one in which she can tell her own story in her own voice" (2016, p. 69). Gilliland and Caswell (2016) align their work with other feminist and anti-oppression scholars who have attempted to find voice where there is none, suggesting: "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" (2016, p. 73). In a similar vein, Donna Haraway's concept of speculative fabulation contends that "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (Haraway 2016, p. 12). Being attentive to the interstitial spaces between what is known and what could be is part of what Haraway terms "staying with trouble"; of building relationality and responsibility into how we represent the world and hold it to account. In the archive, "doing speculatively allows us to foreground feminist imaginaries" (Toupin and Spideralex 2018); it is a device for both provoking what has been and predicting what could come.

Over the past few years, I have become increasingly interested in the feminized history of the archival field and more and more impatient with the lack of records and stories available to me. Reading the work of Rault (2011), Love (2007), Butler (1979), Walker (1983), and Hartman (2007, 2008), I have chosen here to *do speculatively*; to take the examples of the feminized archival bodies and voices available to me and to start connecting experiences, imagined pasts, and anticipated futures that centre the hard-to-uncover archival worker; the handmaiden spectre; bodies and lives forcefully gendered, marginalized and forgotten. In the following sections, I introduce frameworks for "doing speculatively"; for building narratives of feminization using the figure of the handmaiden.

Doing speculatively, part one

The handmaiden in the house of memory, aka archival work is domestic labour

> The surest way to preserve your books in health is to treat them as you would your own children, who are sure to sicken if confined in an atmosphere which is impure, too hot, too cold, too damp or too dry (Blades 1880).

Derrida traces the word archive to the Greek "arkheion" meaning: "a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates" (Derrida 1995, p. 2). For Derrida, there is no archive without externality; to archive is to consign, or inscribe a trace, to a space outside (Derrida 2002; Ketelaar 2001, p. 132). Derrida evokes the idea of home further stating: "It is… in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place" (Derrida 1995, p. 2). Thus "the image of a house of memory to which the archivist holds the key is a familiar and persistent metaphor in the archival world" (Bastian 2003–2004, p. 1), rendering the archive as both a

physical space and a conceptual memory space. In this context, the archivist does not just hold the key; she also decides when to open and close the door, arranges, sorts and organizes, and takes out the trash, ultimately constructing and influencing what can be known.

Archives as physical sites and locations require close attention. Jeannette Bastian suggests that "although we often tend to focus on [archival] contents as the loci of memory, memory may also attach itself to the physical spaces themselves" (Bastian 2003–2004, p. 9). As feminist scholars, we must explore how objects and sites become normalized through attachment to memories, experiences, practices, and expectations (Ahmed 2010). In her analysis of objects and materials encountered at sites of protest, Anna Feigenbaum demonstrates this line of inquiry by suggesting that "when objects and architectures are repeatedly encountered at sites of struggle, they become stickier and stickier—laden with meaning and potent with feelings" (Feigenbaum 2014, p. 17). Commenting on the tents erected at sites of protest, Feigenbaum positions these objects as symbolic of the continual contestation, performance and marking of space that occurs in these environments: "tents tell their own stories. Some of these are manifested on canvas and tarpaulin walls in painted slogans and sentiments. Others are background stories, carrying years of land rights and notions of what it means to be at home and what it is to be denied a home-place" (Feigenbaum 2014, p. 22). The author suggests that protest materials "become stickier and stickier with meaning as protestors reorient themselves toward what their bodies—with these objects—can do" (Feigenbaum 2014, p. 22). When we consider archival sites as powerful meaning-makers, their characterization as house or home normalizes certain expectations of them as home spaces and necessitates a form of work that is homemaking. I have already spoken to the work of the handmaiden as reproductive labour, and I want to explore this consideration further within the domestic realm of the archive.

Returning to one of the most-cited pieces of archival turn literature, Derrida's "Archive fever", I wonder what types of expectations or feelings arise when rather than approaching Freud's archive through a discursive Derridean lens, one that considers the nature of archives through a language of psychoanalysis and deconstruction, we instead consider the concrete corners of Freud's archive; an archive partly born from Anna Freud's hall cupboards, and located (partially) at Freud's former residence at 20 Maresfield Gardens in London. In the mid-seventies Jeffrey Masson was the controversial Projects Director of the Freud Archives. In the following passage, he describes accessing Freud's personal papers: "…finally, Anna Freud gave me access to the formidable cupboard. This was a large, dark wooden cupboard that stood on the landing outside her bedroom and was filled with about a thousand letters from Freud. No one else had ever read them … It was a treasure trove! There were all kinds of things in it that no one knew about …" (Malcolm 1984, p. 34). In New Yorker reporter Janet Malcolm's telling, Freud's archive and its subsequent custodianship by his daughter Anna were so truly imbricated with the Freud family's domestic space that Anna was not comfortable with just anyone moving in and caring for the family materials. After it had been determined that Masson was not appropriate for the Projects Director position (he published an article based on Freud's private archive criticizing Freud's abandonment of seduction theory), he

was fired from the Archives, and his plan to move into the Freud home was stymied. In conversation with Masson about his termination Anna apparently stated: "… frankly, I would never have allowed you to live in my house, because my father would not have wanted someone like you living here. He would have wanted someone who was discreet and quiet" (Malcolm 1984, p. 60). Due to his dismissal, the much-maligned former archivist Masson stated in a letter written to Janet Malcolm "I never got the opportunity to go through Anna Freud's house really carefully. Even now I like to fantasize about what I would have found. I know that such an opportunity will never come again, and it makes me a little sad" (Malcolm 1984, p. 165).

In considering the Freud archive as a physical space, its entanglement with the domestic sphere is palpable. The cupboard full of letters across from Anna's bedroom, the attempts to move an archivist into the space to care for the materials in situ, in this context, the Freud home/archive asks for a type of interpretation that calls attention to the network of relations connecting the Freud family, the act of archiving, and the space within which this relationality is characterized and housed. It is almost possible to feel Anna Freud's proximity to the archive; to picture her brushing past the cupboard full of letters across from her room as she enters and leaves. Anna Freud's archival power was enacted and solidified in large part through the domestic space that both she and the records occupied. Interestingly, Jeffrey Masson later sued Janet Malcolm for quotations and recollections cited in her articles and books that he claimed were fabricated, forcing Malcolm to reach back into her own archive to produce substantiating documentation, some of which was missing (Boynton 1994). We rely on Malcolm's archive with its own silences, impressions, and encounters to characterize Anna Freud's domestic space and the Freud archive. Fabulations on fabulations.

Within feminist scholarship, the home has historically been a site of struggle (Federici 2012). Spearheaded in the early 1970s by scholars and activists including Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Selma James, the Wages for Housework campaign is one of the most recognizable confrontations of the uneven distribution of capital between those who work inside versus outside the home (Federici and Austin 2017). An iconic poster drawn by Nicole Cox in 1974 depicts the Statue of Liberty holding a broom and proclaims: "The Women of the World are Serving Notice! We want wages for every dirty toilet, every indecent assault, every painful childbirth, every cup of coffee, and every smile, and if we don't get what we want we will simply refuse to work any longer!" (Federici and Austin 2017, p. 41). Wages for Housework "called for the re-appropriation of the wealth that woman have produced" (Federici and Austin 2017, p. 18) through positioning reproductive labour as essential to the accumulation of capital. Weeks' (2004) analysis of women's work names the reproductive forms of labour for which "women are disproportionately responsible", citing "caring labour", "emotional labour", "maternal labour", and "kin work" as examples. These labour formations are a social necessity, argues Weeks, yet "despite their importance, this labour is often invisible" (Weeks 2004, p. 185). Denaturalizing reproductive labour requires increased recognition of the forms of work that have "been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration …" (Federici and Austin 2017, p. 16). The act of archiving has been positioned as a comparable internal need; it is

not surprising that Anna Freud became the documentary gatekeeper of her family. Harkening back to my earlier discussion of the imbrication of blood lines and records continuity in conceptualizations of provenance, we can understand reproductive labour as a mechanism for nurturing children *and* the historical record. Tom Nesmith elaborates on these early twentieth-century attitudes stating:

> The view that women were especially suited for recordkeeping duties because of their ability to communicate well was rooted in attitudes toward their prior and essential maternal role … Women had a distinct responsibility as guardians and bearers of memory, and so they wrote histories, formed women's historical societies, took a major part in historic sites and war memorial movements, maintained family records and correspondence — a duty the photographic industry quickly perceived — and ensured that anniversaries, birthdays, and special occasions like Christmas were remembered and properly celebrated (Nesmith 1982, p. 20).

That archival labour has historically been subsumed under the umbrella of reproductive labour is a common theme across stories of family and personal archives where women were the primary documentarians. John Randolph's comprehensive account of the Bakunin Family Archive further illustrates this point. The influential Bakunin family, "iconic figures for Imperial Russia's liberal party" (Randolph 2005, p. 211), accumulated a large family archive of documents, books and correspondence throughout the nineteenth century. In this context "the Bakunin women assumed a responsibility for organizing and preserving this 'epistolary commerce'. Domesticity, in other words, added a new, affective economy to their traditional task of estate-management" (Randolph 2005, p. 214). The highly complex nature of the work that Natalia Bakunina and her relatives were performing becomes visible through close examination of the materials they were producing; hand-copied and hand-sewn compilations and manuscripts, and carefully arranged correspondence and publications that acted as primary source material for historians and researchers. In an age of female repression, and with a limited ability to engage with politics or the public sphere, the Bakunin women "used their stewardship of this much-sought after archive to project their values into institutions (the Academy, the press) that resisted their direct participation" (Randolph 2005, p. 217). Thus, political and ideological intervention into the Russian public sphere was another dimension of the (largely invisible) work being performed by female members of the Bakunin family; work that went undetected under the guise of domestic labour. From tents, to homes, to cupboards. Handmaidens unite.

Doing speculatively, part two

Bodily encounters of a handmaiden, aka 'I not only could predict the loss, I felt it'

> We walk, sedately. The sun is out, in the sky there are white fluffy clouds, the kind that look like headless sheep. Given our wings, our blinkers, it's

> hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps (Atwood 1985, p. 38).

Archivists are forever encountering bodies: bodies of records, bodies of knowledge, the disintegrating bodies of silverfish, bodily matter, bodily impressions, researchers, colleagues, volunteers, managers, rodents… In this section I consider the affective, lively and intimate relations that are made possible through the collision of the archivist with the myriad material and non-material bodies in their orbit.

In her depiction of archiving disintegrating audio-visual materials in a Cuban archive, Janet Ceja Alcalá states: "As I examined the mold on the motion-picture film stock, saw the decay, smelled the vinegar, endured the heat, and felt the sweat form in my pores, I not only could predict the loss, I felt it" (Ceja Alcalá et al. 2015, p. 325). Through this single anecdote, Ceja Alcalá gives voice to the affective work of archiving that so often eludes articulation. Cifor defines affect as "a force that creates a relationship (conscious or otherwise) between a body (individual or collective) and the world" (Cifor 2016, p. 10). Sara Ahmed further illustrates the imbrication of affects, emotion and feeling stating:

> Following other feminist theorists, I am deeply concerned with how in feeling a body is moved: who could even think of feeling without also recalling physical impressions: the sweatiness of skin, the hair rising; or the sound of one's heartbeat getting louder? I also wanted to explore how emotions do other things in other ways; how to be affected by something is an orientation or direction toward that thing that has worldly effects (Ahmed 2015, p. 209).

The idea that to be affected by something is a bodily and emotional orientation towards something that has worldly effects can be explored further through Shepherd's (2016) account of Ethel Stokes, an early British archivist.

Although the formal establishment of Western archives in the early twentieth century was heavily dependent on the work of mostly male historians-turned-archivists, many women were pivotal to early archiving programs. Ethel Stokes' work was particularly influential to records preservation programs in the UK from the 1890s up until WWII. Shepherd notes: "the work took its toll on Stokes, who persisted with all her obligations throughout the bombings of London, even though her room off Chancery Lane was destroyed and she lost most of her possessions" (Shepherd 2016, p. 99). Shepherd observes that "for the last 8 months of [Stokes'] life she slept on a mattress on the floor underneath a table in the library at the [Public Records Office]" (Shepherd 2016, p. 99). Stokes died in 1944 after she was struck by a truck while crossing the road during a blackout. These details, carefully pieced together by Shepherd, animate Stokes. Stokes' bodily presence and the image of her sleeping in the archive make visible the worldly effects of being affected: sleeping amongst the records in your care is undeniably a bodily act, but it is also an emotional act. Ethel Stokes' story does the work of positioning the archivist as a powerful mediator between records and the world.

Cifor's incisive articulation of the liveliness of bodily encounters in the archive further illustrates the material and non-material relations that are provoked by and through the archive. She states:

> Liveliness articulates how matter itself, including the bodily matter, is animate and imbued with a particular kind of agential and affective vitality. Through the lens of liveliness, the relations of archival records, the space of the archives, and the other actors (human and non-human) involved can be understood as moving, changeable, and interrelated constructions (Cifor 2017, p. 6).

Cifor foregrounds her discussion of liveliness by situating it within ongoing debates about "the material" in feminist theory. As Cifor notes, "feminist scholarship has been frequently and sharply critiqued for its 'flight from the material'" (Cifor 2017, p. 6) and positioned as "habitually 'social constructionist'" (Ahmed 2008, p. 24). New materialist scholars, most notably Barad (2003), have argued that through disregarding the body "feminism has reduced matter to culture" (Ahmed 2008, p. 24). Barad elaborates, stating: "The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing'—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation" (Barad 2003, p. 802). In critiquing of the work of the new materialists, Ahmed suggests that feminist thought has always considered the body and the material world, further asserting that "by turning matter into an object of theoretical category… new materialism reintroduces the binarism between materiality and culture" (Ahmed 2008, p. 35); a split that feminist thought has worked hard to dispel over the years. When considering archival orientations, the material and non-material cannot easily be separated or created distinct, an observation handled deftly by Cifor.

Recalling a course on paper conservation orients my own attention towards the liveliness of unwanted bodies in the archives, towards silverfish and their insatiable appetites for paper matter. Silverfish are literally and figuratively *eating* our words, our history and their own becoming increasingly interpolated with every phrase, protein, and starch they ingest. They die and decompose next to ink, pencil, paper and linen, and their remnants become disquieting monuments to pasts they have greedily consumed whole. Their excrement leaves a spackling of dark dust across hand written pages. Images of these pests depict them half-crushed and hanging out of large bound books. Real-life encounters with the skittering bodies of archival pests are startling, what havoc are they wreaking? Advice for exterminating silverfish reads like a precise and coordinated attack. Isolate the materials. Put papers into a deep freeze. Above all practice good housekeeping (Harry Ransom Center 2018). And on cue we return to the archive as a home place, its failure to thrive a symptom of bad housekeeping and ineffective handmaidens.

Recognizing the ongoing debates about the legibility of new materialism scholarship, Cifor suggests that liveliness and conceptualizations of "new materialism can … be generatively understood as a response to and a means to contend critically with evolving and emerging understandings and forms of materiality" (Cifor 2017, p. 6) rather than a mechanism for turning matter into a "fetish object" (Ahmed 2008, p. 35). In the following passage, Cifor recounts her own bodily encounter at the GLBT Historical Society:

> I pull out a manila envelope. Handwritten large letters in black marker on the envelope's fore side is 'Harvey Milk's Pony Tail' (Harvey Milk and Scott Smith Collection of Artifacts and Ephemera). Perhaps with such an explicit label, it should have felt less surprising than it was that a peek inside the envelope did indeed reveal the thick, dark brown locks of Milk's shorn ponytail. This encounter between my own body, Milk's bodily matter, and the archives itself is startling (Cifor 2017, p. 5).

As Cifor's recollection illustrates, the concept of liveliness "holds the promise of reframing both subjects and objects in terms of their relations, of their volatile capacities to affect and to be affected" (Cifor 2017, p. 18) opening up new ways of understanding archives as animated by ever-changing formations of people, objects and relations that coalesce, collide, and repel in unexpected and oftentimes intimate ways. To think of the handmaiden figure as embodied is to consider her both as a vessel for organizing principles, knowledge and order, but also as a body in constant encounter with archival forces.

Across narratives of Ethel Stokes' waking and un-waking hours, silverfish distended with historical prose, and Harvey Milk's pony tail, emerges a positioning of the archive as enacting and enabling intimacy through material encounters. Through an examination of letters written from Greta Garbo to her supposed lover Mercedes de Acosta, Maryanne Dever (2010) locates intimacy not in the text of the letters (which by all accounts are fairly bereft of romantic content) but rather in the materiality of the archival items themselves. De Acosta kept everything that Garbo mailed her including blank note cards which she arranged by year, and a tracing of Garbo's foot which "[extends] across two small sheets of unlined notepaper" (Dever 2010, p. 163). According to Dever, the letters reveal Garbo frequently sidelining de Acosta, declining to meet up with her and being coy about future plans; thus, the narrative that the letters do construct is one of refusal. Dever states:

> Since a significant proportion of the later letters in this archive comprise Garbo's repeated refusals to meet, the letters become the key signs or sole evidence of the special relationship she shared with the star. In short, the body de Acosta has access to is not the body of the star but the body of papers that gives their often tense and attenuated relationship a continuing material form (Dever 2010, p. 167).

Garbo's blank letters and cards to de Acosta demonstrate the affective power of human and non-human bodily encounters; they are lively and intimate in ways that defy textual representation or easy interpretation. To consider archival encounters is to pay close attention to the historical positioning of archivists' bodies as gatekeepers, guides, barriers, and co-conspirators; to take into account how bodily encounters with the material and non-material are an important dimension of archival work; and to believe that bodies of records can come to stand in for bodies of a different sort. Notions of affect, liveliness, and intimacy are all ways of naming archival encounters and of positioning the body of the archivist as a unique facilitator of meaning, feeling and presence. Handmaidens press on.

Conclusion

> If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending… But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one (Atwood 1985, p. 174).

The handmaiden spectre continues to haunt, trouble and intervene in our discipline in myriad ways. However, archives are more than metaphors; this is something that archival scholars and practitioners have always known, and it is consistently one of the greatest critiques of archival turn literature. I do not wish to erase the material conditions of work and labour that characterize the archival field by relegating it to language, but I do think that the archival field should be interrogated for the ways in which work and gender have been historically figured. Reflecting on the archival profession, Craig et al. note that "Many archivists [are] acutely aware that they lack their own history … archivists are discovering, or re-discovering that their work, their institutions, and their materials have a rich history that is neither obvious, simple, transparent, nor beyond debate" (Craig et al. 2005, p. 3). As a field, we are still building our professional history, and I am aware that the particular history I have chosen to tackle with this piece is indeed not "obvious, simple, transparent, nor beyond debate". My hope is that the figure of the handmaiden can provide a point of departure for considering the ways in which the archival worker has been historically constructed through language, attitudes, perceptions and practice.

Although we may not consider archivists working in contemporary institutions to be undertaking domestic labour, the fact remains that today, the majority of archivists in North America identify as women[1] (Israel and Eyre 2017, p. 7). We also know that in the workplace it is women and other marginalized workers who take on the most uncompensated service labour and emotional labour; an issue compounded by intersections of race, class, sexuality, gender and ability (Bright 2018; Brown and Leung 2018; Aiko Moore and Estrellado 2018). Feminized and gendered labour persist in our field as they do in many others. Looking through Anna Freud's cupboards alongside Janet Malcolm, encountering Harvey Milk's papers with Marika Cifor, and guided through Greta Garbo's note cards by Maryanne Dever, I have positioned archives as spaces negotiated and enacted through archival work and the forces and conditions that construct and constrain it. Feminization is only one condition, and it would be remiss of me not to point to the scholarship of Drake (2017a, b), Williams and Drake (2017) and Caswell (2016, 2017) whose work on confronting oppression in our field calls out the archival profession for its complicity in replicating whiteness. In the field of library and

[1] The 2017 WArS/SAA Salary Survey produced by the Society of American Archivists: Women Archivists Section indicates that in the United States 84.3% of surveyed archivists identified as female, with 0.8% identifying as gender nonbinary and 1.1% preferring not to specify gender. For a breakdown of how American archivists identify across intersectional identities including: gender, pronoun preferences, ethnicity/race, sexual orientation, immigrant status, faith, relationship status, ability and military service see page 7 of the WArS/SAA Salary Survey (Israel and Eyre 2017).

information studies, a rhetoric of cultural caretaking as the purview of white, educated, middle-class women continued well into the twentieth century constructing and perpetuating the "ideal archival worker" through reified categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability (Trace 2015; Espinal et al. 2018). Prevailing notions of professional behaviour as synonymous with servility and the maintenance of the status quo have enabled these categories to root and to propagate within the fields of libraries and archives (Brown and Leung 2018; Linares and Cunningham 2018; Neely 2018; Drake 2016, 2017a, b; Caswell 2016). To discuss care in the archive is also to evoke paternalistic instantiations of care tied to white supremacy and the assumption that women, people of colour, and disabled folks cannot care of themselves. Not to mention that the archival profession, by tying neutrality to notions of femininity and passivity, has constructed neutrality as an unassailable virtue to such an extent that even today there persists (in some quarters) a misperception that the best archival practice is neutral archive practice.

Despite Howard Zinn's urgent call over 40 years ago for archivists to "refuse to be instruments of social control" (Zinn 1977, p. 25) by fighting against prejudice and injustice, the archival profession continues to uphold systems of oppression through collections development strategies that entrench privileged perspectives, ableist policies that do not account for multimodal access, and "cataloguing and classification schemas based in colonialist or racist terms that do direct harm to individuals" (Williams and Drake 2017, p. 4). Chou and Pho's 2018 edited volume "Pushing the margins: women of colour and intersectionality in LIS", addresses oppression in the field by presenting a series of essays that explore "what it means to be in a white, feminized profession", suggesting ways of making "[LIS] a feminist profession—one that actively seeks to elevate women who exist in the margins specifically" (Chou and Pho 2018, pp. 7–8). As Brown and Leung note in their essay contained within the volume, in LIS institutions "you have to pass by passing your way through whiteness. If whiteness is what the institution is oriented around, then even bodies that do not appear white have to inhabit whiteness" (Brown and Leung 2018, p. 340). Drawing from April Reign's #OscarsSoWhite hashtag, Drake succinctly characterizes this reality as #ArchivesSoWhite, noting that there is a pressing need for all of us working in and studying archives to "confront the ways in which our field enables, embraces, and embodies white supremacy and anti-blackness" inviting us to "think about a way to do archives differently, daringly and dauntlessly" (Drake 2016).

As Williams and Drake (2017) illustrate, projects like A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland (2019) have the ability to position grass roots and activist archives as sites of information circulation and knowledge sharing that can perform specific and targeted political work while simultaneously challenging entrenched archival policies and practices (Caswell 2015; Caswell et al. 2017; Henningham et al. 2017; Watts 2017; Migoni et al. 2017; Williams and Drake 2017). These same projects and imperatives have the ability to reconstitute the archival worker by dismantling the underlying assumptions of gender, race, and ability that the handmaiden has come to personify. We are, all of us, doing speculatively; "imagining otherwise" in an effort to build better worlds with better actors (Gilliland and Caswell 2016).

Handmaidens have historically been the reproductive servants of the dominant class, but they have never been happy about it. In an unexpected archival twist, the epilogue of Atwood's novel reveals June/Offred as both handmaiden and documentarian. That "The handmaid's tale" itself could never have existed without June's documentation of her experiences living under Gilead's authoritarian rule is a conceit Atwood forces us to accept. However, June's recordkeeping is uneven in many ways; most notably, she remains nameless, making the verification of her history difficult for future scholars and historians. Thus, June and her archive are plagued by the contradictions of the handmaiden until the bitter end; they are both voiceless and defiant, passive and revelatory. Breaking this trope requires naming, surfacing and reconfiguring the reproductive labour undertaken by feminized bodies in the archive in order to position this work as central to the existence and development of our field.

I would like to close by bringing together two scholars who, should their paths ever cross, would probably have a great deal to say to one another. Earlier in this essay I quoted feminist philosopher Donna Haraway on the concept of speculative fabulation. The passage reads:

> It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories (Haraway 2016, p. 12).

Now consider this passage, written by archival scholar Eric Ketelaar on the concept of archivalization:

> How I write…makes a difference for what I write. How I preserve—through migration or emulation—makes a difference for how I can relate to the record and how I access the record in different cognitive, affective, and conative modes. And not only technology but also the social context in which I write and read makes a difference—cognitively, affectively, and conatively—for what I write and read (Ketelaar 2012, pp. 26–27).

In one final act of speculation, I think of Haraway and Ketelaar as two nodes relaying world-building messages back and forth to one another. Feminist worlds and feminist stories, archival worlds and archival stories, these are always entirely the work of us: the people invested in labouring, encountering, confronting and rebuilding. How we tell stories about our work and our worlds matter because they have a habit of lingering. Just ask the handmaiden.

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