

## At Home in Archival Grief: Lost Canons and Displaced Stories

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### ABSTRACT

What happens when desires for homogeneity, belonging and possession conflict with realities of migration and loss? What happens when the life of the scholar and the life of the exile are imagined together? What does it mean to live simultaneously within two clashing narratives, as so many scholars do? And what if we treat the past as something other than our homeland? The following stories about archive, canon, and patrimony are also questions about scholarly subjectivity. By recounting scenes of living at odds with racialized or gendered narratives of the proper location and embodiment of knowledge, I seek to expand scholarly imagination. There are many more ways to relate to the past through the Classical or Christian archive than through simple assertions of continuity. Archival grief may be the condition to which the scholarly imaginary is subject.

### KEYWORDS

Canon, archive, Christian history, ethics of scholarship, imagination

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*By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1–4)*

This is about the archive as home when your home is a world of displacement and loss. It is about reaching out for the past through books, about story as a way to belong.<sup>1</sup>

A people in exile possess a future of return. They are at the bottom point of the plot, between a past when they had a home and a future when they will go back home again. A people in exile are inside a story which says the place they are in is the wrong place. A people in exile tell this story in a world where their story clashes with the captor's

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<sup>1</sup> This essay has developed out of a keynote lecture delivered in Oslo for the 2018 Authoritative Texts and Their Reception summer school at the kind invitation of Hugo Lundhaug. I owe great thanks to the conveners and participants of that summer school, especially Kelsie Rodenbiker and Liv Ingeborg Lied, and to the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters where I was a fellow while preparing this essay for submission.



story. A people who have triumphed are in the right place. They possess both their own story and a story about the captive people as people who were formerly of no use somewhere else, but now are here and useful. In the captor's story, the exiled people have a past that doesn't matter. Their meaning in the present is only that they are now of use. Their future will be more of the same. And so the exiled people imagine themselves on the way home while their captors imagine them forever captive. The exiles live simultaneously inside two clashing stories. That is why it hurts.

The stories of people in exile are rebellious stories, hard stories to tell, stories like spades blistering your hands when you turn over the earth to grow a future which talks back to your captors and answers to your own loss. A people in exile need their past. Stories of the past guarantee the future. Stories of the past offer themselves in evidence that the present is wrong.

Grief is not only the work of the migrant or refugee, of the widow or orphan. Grief is also the fruit of contingency and displacement and loss which is at the root of the archive. What is archival grief? It's when you lose your past and your stories, when you have to leave your home and when leaving means you can't go back. Archival grief arises because losing your stories means losing the place where you touch the past, where your life has space to run through a longer vein than the short stroke of our own body. The archive can be tender but it is also greedy and playful and big. We want more, but if we ever had everything it would lose its magic. The quantity that is lost is the quantity of tenderness in the archive. Our imagination flourishes there because we know that, like the exile's homecoming, we can never have it, yet we must keep wanting it.

An archive is where we go back to what has departed. It promises to tell us more. Grief is saying good-bye. Grief is when you find yourself continuing along a timeline onto which you have been jolted by loss, displaced by a car accident or a phone call from the hospital or by a bullet. Now you're traveling through a world it would have hurt too much to imagine. The present and the future move forward in the wrong direction. The past is the only world left where you were never yet an exile.

### **Here is a Story about Books and Places**

Once upon a time, I was a blond sixteen-year-old, returning to America after growing up in Papua New Guinea. At that time, I learned that displacement never resolves. Even when you return a child to her country of birth, the fact that she must be returned erases the naturalness of a particular place, the very naturalness which makes that place the place we belong. This happens to people when they migrate. We can see it happening to people when new generations are brought up by displaced elders. We should also learn to see it

happening to books when we capture them for European narratives, when we displace them into Western canons and then require of them a song about someone else's ancient past as if it were our own.

As soon as I was placed, at the age of eight, in the mountain grasslands of Papua New Guinea, I could never be re-placed as a regular white person in America. I would always look like one, but I would always be at odds with being in the place I, according to my ancestry and my passport, was supposed to fit.

When I returned to the US, I began to learn that I would spend the rest of my life being illegible. I learned what it is to live as a sealed-off archive, a library which carries books in languages no one around here speaks. In that year, I was baptized into archival grief. Eight years of my life became invisible, unknown to us, like a lost quire or a missing fragment, because there was and is no place to tell the story of that time. The archive of those eight years has been papered over again and again, not by any unwillingness on my part to tell those stories, but by the blankness or surprise on the faces of the people I try to tell it to. It is sealed over again and again by the mismatch between my past and what it is possible to say. There is a lack of available responses for anyone I try to tell it to. I can say "I grew up in Papua New Guinea" and you can say, "Wow, so exotic! What an experience!" There simply is no social space in which I can deliver a satisfactory narrative, no epistemic desk on which I can open that book and show it to Western readers. My knowledge and my readers' knowledge don't hook together. My past and their ability to imagine that past are odd pieces from two different games.

I say, "I grew up in Papua New Guinea." Then people say "Wow! So different! That's a long way away!" which I never say when people tell me they grew up in Texas although Texas is very different and a long way away. Very consistently, people immediately relate my past to a story they do know. They ask if I have read *The Poisonwood Bible* or confess that they once saw a documentary about birds or butterflies or strange tribes in Papua New Guinea. They pick my past up like a puzzle piece and try to match it into the frame they have already buttoned down onto the table, a scene of stories that fit together. When we ask each other "Where are you from?" we are asking "Which story are you part of?" We fan out our repertoire of stories and ask each other to pick a card and with pleasure note that it matches. If it does not match, we don't know what to do. It is offensive to say you cannot pick a card or that you don't want to. It is a failure to properly play the game of past and story and body.

The early Christian archive says, "This is a Gnostic Gospel" and we say "How strange! How esoteric! How far away!" when indeed our newest technologies today are largely used to find secret knowledge which will save us and justify us and make us

superior to others. The archive says, "Here is an early Christian discussion of a biblical text" and we say, "That can only be a commentary!" when in fact we ourselves have seen discussions of biblical texts which explain why you should buy a new car or not be gay or vote for somebody else and are not commentaries. In both cases, there is a mismatch between what is there and what can be seen and heard, the stories the books want to tell, and the space available to tell them and hear them. To open that archive, to have enough cards in our hand to offer, we have to expand our imagination of which pasts are possible. Then we would learn to be at home with things we don't know, with gaps in the puzzle, with people who cannot pick a card.

When I was sixteen, I lost one canon and gained another. Or better, I learned that the canon I had did not count as a canon. There was another larger one which did count as part of my heritage although it was foreign to me. What I had inherited, in reality, by the age of 16, was a canon which consisted of the following items:

- All of the Bible and the Bible every day including para-biblical discourses of songs, hymns, preaching, Bible study arcana, youth-group talks, and memory verses.
- Tolkien, all of it, several times.
- Cowboy novels by Louis L'Amour which I filched from my dad to escape boredom while living in profound isolation in a grass hut on the top of a mountain.
- Mouldy paperbacks that were intended for winsome young people in Australia but which, in a tropical climate, absorbed humidity and puffed up like baking bread.
- Slightly less mouldy paperbacks written by Protestant ladies with devotional themes like how to be a godly woman or one woman's search for God.
- Tin-Tin and Asterix comics someone had donated to the children's homes I sometimes lived in, relics allowing for the mimicry of a commonwealth childhood. Also Enid Blyton.
- Spanish language textbooks from the 1960s someone had donated to the school I sometimes attended. They had two-colour illustrations in purple and green.
- Books like *Syntactical Features of Papuan Languages* which I also filched from my dad.
- Books and magazines from Focus on the Family including titles like *Dare to Discipline* which was amended to *Double Dog Dare to Discipline* when attempts were made to apply its teaching to my person, and a book which described heterosexual intercourse as providing a tingling feeling.
- My sister's romance novels which repelled me greatly. My brother's books with

charts of the types of dogs and fish and diagrams and maps. My other sister's books about wholesome American teenagers learning wholesome lessons.

The religious environment coloured that archive, certainly, but so did the family environment. Each book was known to have a specific owner and attempts to seize another family member's book before they were finished would out you as a rogue state, while negotiations to be allowed to trade off with a sibling on reading the same book taught me more about getting to yes than Harvard ever could. The physical environment also shaped that archive, not only in finding oneself on an island traversed especially heavily by Australians and the British. In that world, books were relics of other people's home countries, brought along in suitcases and boxes and then passed from hand to hand until they inevitably fell apart. They were objects rendered absurd by the realities of a tropical climate, heavy objects that got left behind if you had to walk to your village or if they went over the very slim weight allowance that could fit into a Cessna 206. If you had a location accessible by road, books were in a precious cardboard box that was stacked against the back wall and only loaded onto the truck last, if there was room.

I can see that box now, the nine- or ten-year-old me eyeing it in its tenuous place. When the Tura papyri, the codices I wrote my last book about, were found, they were nestled into the right-angle made by the wall and the floor of a cave. That cardboard box I eyed as a kid also nestled between the dirty cement behind the house and the plywood outer wall. I would stand there like a kid in a Toni Morrison story, with one foot on top of the other, watching as the truck filled up to see if that cardboard box full of other worlds would still fit.

That box would determine how excruciating the boredom of the next three months would be, whether I would have anything to read, or whether I would spend even more time lying on my back next to the creek imagining that the curve of the hill under my spine was the curvature of the globe itself, whether I would have to read all of my textbooks and all of the Bible, again, whether I would spend yet more time squatting next to the fires I built every single afternoon on a patch of mud behind the house, whether I would be set to doing even more chores, pumping water and wringing out washing and hanging laundry and splitting kindling, to keep me from climbing the walls with sheer boredom. That cardboard box was epistemic refuge and verbal salvation for one little girl.

That cardboard box also determined whether I would, by hand, try to write stories myself. They were always stories about girls on farms or cowboys or young princes in medieval forests or heroic tragic young women hiding Jews during the war in Europe. (In these latter stories I was fascinated by women who wore wool and stockings and leather shoes, all materials entirely foreign to me, materials which in my German life now I wear



with a particular incoherent pleasure). They were stories through which I grasped at the imagined patrimony, a textual past I was supposed to be part of: the American farm girl or cowboy on the prairie, the young prince from fairy tales and a diffuse Anglo-Saxon imaginary, the valiant young woman in World War II Europe. But they were all stories I could never really write because I was trying to add on to the tellable stories I had read while living inside an illegible and untellable story myself. An unimagined person imagines differently than one who is not exiled from the world of stories. An unimagined person who traces over the stories which have left her out is working in exile with no recourse to a past home or a future return.

My life was most like that of a farm girl: I had braids and did chores around the house. But my life was also taking place outside of the narrative of Western expansion, with no horses or Sunday clothes or pies, the paraphernalia of *Little House on the Prairie* shows I had watched when I still lived in America. It was futile to try to write myself into the white world on a Black mountain. The stories never turned out. I was living outside of the historical canon, in a space that was only tellable on National Geographic programs or missionary presentations: the story of what is now my past-place had already been told wrongly by someone else. Without belonging to a place, I couldn't take possession of the past assigned to me, and without ownership of the past, I could only mimic other people's stories.

Now I'm a writer and a historian. I'm not telling you this story of archival grief and lost stories so that I will seem tragic and mysterious and everyone will feel sorry for me and think they ought to buy me a drink. I want this untellable story to act as a parable for the tragedies and mysteries of scholarly writing about the past, for it to make visible and palpable the state of displacement that we all work in when we write about past authors. The subject position of the scholar invites us to pretend that this is a natural and ordinary thing to do, to pretend that we own the past we are writing about, that when European and American scholars write about Christianity they are writing about their own ancestors, writing from where they belong about texts which belong to them. I want to stand that subject position next to the subject position of the little white girl on the Black mountain, dying for something to read and unable to write about her assigned past because it was in wild contradiction to what she saw out the window and felt on her skin, unable to write about her present because it did not plot on any acknowledged timeline. I want to ask you which subject is stranger. Which one is living in the more implausible state of relationship to the archive?

In my past, a really heavy box of books could be placed, with an extra kid as a counterweight on the other side, over the back wheels of the truck, as ballast, to allow for better traction on a muddy hill.



When we think about books in a tropical country, we can see the physical limitations on their use and survival. We can see how they are physically ridiculous in a world where they turn mouldy and expand like baking bread or are only useful as ballast to get a truck up a muddy hill in the rainy season. It is with this same eye that we must look at books in the ancient world, and, most importantly, in our own world. *Why do we have the things we have? Why do we know about Augustine? Why do we know about Paul, for that matter?* Not because of any natural relationship between them and us, but because there was money in certain hands and room in the truck, because certain texts were used as ballast in the effort to gain traction enough to drive up the muddy hill into the future.

When I was re-displaced to America, we lived in a small town where my mother had grown up and which, for such biological reasons, was counted as my heritage. The village where I in fact grew up, also for biological reasons, could not be counted as my heritage, although I knew how to behave there much better than I did in the US. In my mother's hometown, there was a public library and a school library. I undertook to read the new canon that had suddenly become available to me, to try to be part of this new world. And so I read.

At school, I started with English literature, working chronologically from left to right down the shelves: Beowulf, Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, all of it. In the public library, I started with journals and letters by authors and artists, craving each exotic European detail of picnics and smoking and dances and cafes and Alpine inns. I carried the gigantic art history books back and forth to my little table in a library which had, like the town itself, been built and funded under Roosevelt's New Deal. I swam in post-impressionism, expressionism, in the letters of Van Gogh to his brother, in the correspondence between Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak. When the spring came, I had got to grips with the 20th Century on both fronts, and from there I was a goner: I read all of Hemingway, E.M Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack London, Truman Capote, the Beat poets. I studied all of Picasso, Matisse, Egon Schiele, with a wild wallowing glee entirely unlike the attitude of the American teenager I officially was. I was an American teenager reading but I was not reading as an American teenager. If this happens to migrant children, how much more should we expect large gaps between the biographic and biological tags we put on ancient readers and the kind of reading that person in fact does?

Now I am still fascinated by matches and mismatches between what we can ask and what there is to know, by the hunger of readers, and by stories that are left untold. Most of all, I am asking about historical scholarship as an act of taking possession of the past, as if it were the land the Lord has promised, as if we were exiles going home. Attaching ourselves to an archive, whether living in our mother's hometown or filching

cowboy novels from our father, is part of genealogy and inheritance, whether imagined or real, functioning or not.

### **Here is a Story about Imagination and Scholarship**

As scholars, we collaborate with each other in all kinds of games. For a few years now, my colleagues in Oslo and I have been playing a game together where they say to me “Come here and do whatever you want,” and I say, “Yes please,” and then I do it. That is not the game that inherited tradition, academic orthodoxy, if you will, invites us to play. In modernity our “guy,” the marker we send around the board as we play this game called scholarship, is an ultra-rational disembodied mind, who sits at a desk for at least ten hours a day and diagnoses things as either pagan or Christian, orthodox or heretical, original or derivative. We are all invited to impersonate this figure when we work, to wear his clothes, drink his coffee, read his books and tell his stories. That invitation is sent to us from the mythical past in which that type of scholarliness was an ideal. But even as we dress up like that, we are also in *this* time and *these* bodies. We are all engaged in a sort of academic drag race, both concealing and revealing the unreality of the scholarly.

If I seek examples in my own experience of scholarship which contradict the disembodied scholarly ideal, I immediately swerve towards repeating another trope. As soon as I mark my own sex, there is a sinkhole in the discourse which draws me towards painting a picture of myself as a Bohemian intellectual, writing in other people’s bedrooms or getting ideas on drunken summer nights. As soon as I mark myself as female and embodied, the available options within the discourse invite me to over-sexualize myself and I have to swerve away again and grip on to my own story: I melted with joy when I saw syntactic similarities between Coptic and the Melanesian Pidgin which I grew up speaking. I’m good at reading not because I went through a fabulous graduate program, which I did not, but because of being awash in words and texts from the time I was born. I’m good at reading because of the times there was enough room in the truck for that cardboard box, and because of the times there wasn’t. Only when I attach my imagination to my particular self can I write and read as a real human being, not as a disembodied mind.

In the narrative first chapter from my last book, I told about being a little girl learning memory verses, about puking in the bishop’s palace in Lund before I presented my research on the Tura papyri for the first time, and about setting my hand to write at my desk at home in Leipzig.<sup>2</sup> Writing myself as author and scholar into the narrative

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<sup>2</sup> Blossom Stefaniw, *Christian Reading: Language, Ethics and the Order of Things*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 6–42, doi:[10.1525/9780520971929](https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520971929).



history of the Tura papyri was a way of finding somewhere else to stand. It was an effort to be one more reader among many, in one particular place, listening to the stories of other readers in other places, rather than a subject who stands above other, more ancient readers.

When we think about past readers and writers, we need to also think about how we are imagining ourselves. We need to know that we are one writer writing about another. As scholars we need to challenge and protect our own imaginations so we know, so we can feel, when we are just repeating a pattern and when our imagination is really anchored to ourselves. I don't know how you are going to do that. I do that through excessive and disorganized reading, by watching movies and reading poetry and going to the opera and walking around in the forest and by staying up too late with weirdos. I do it by letting my imagination be as greedy and sprawling as it is, so that I know, when I write, whether I am writing in my own voice. I let my imagination run around a lot and eat a lot, so I can feel its shape and weight inside me, so I know when it is close and awake while I write.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay on reparative reading asks us to cultivate an ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, becoming able to nourish ourselves in a world in which it is not possible to mark everything as entirely one thing or another.<sup>3</sup> The opposite is paranoid reading, a stance which nervously seeks to pin things down into black and white categories. These are ethical stances as well as epistemic ones. Epistemically, we are asked to tolerate not knowing, to learn how to build shelters and feed ourselves among the cliffs of the tenuous and the provisional. This entails a way of knowing that recognizes itself as fragile, which asks us to know the world as one more animal doing what our species does, not as its master. Ethically, we are asked to sit easy in the saddle, to be responsive and flexible in a foreign textual world, to be a subject who can live without demanding certainty.

One of my favorite ways of learning is through nosiness towards strangers over coffee or wine. I had coffee with a Spanish theoretical physicist and learned that in physics, any model has to accommodate uncertainty. I was absolutely gobsmacked by this notion. Colleagues in the natural sciences were quite comfortable with uncertainty, whereas the going models of religion in late antiquity do not account for uncertainty at all. Methods which map things onto an organic narrative of development towards a Christian west are not accounting for uncertainty, because the end of the story is already taken for

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<sup>3</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Think This Essay Is About You", in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. (Duke University Press: 2003), 123–151, doi:[10.1215/9780822384786-005](https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384786-005).

granted and works as an explanation for why everything happened as it did. But we don't know much about what happened, and we don't know why it happened. *We don't know*. We don't know what the author intended and neither does God. We hardly know what the author wrote. We have what we have. How will we nourish ourselves with that, and what exactly are we hungry for?

C. M. Chin's 2017 essay on radiant historiography articulates an expanded imagination which treats the historic other as truly different rather than as a precursor of the self.<sup>4</sup> That means looking for, making space for, and being curious about difference. It also means resisting the invitation, another sinkhole in the discourse, to identify with the sources. This is a particularly important point for western scholars working on early Christianity. When I taught a course on colonialism in Christian history in a German theology department, a student asked me, "Why should I learn about the libraries of Timbuktu? Do people in Timbuktu learn about Europe?" I explained that yes, schoolchildren in Timbuktu learn about French history and they learn it in French. The real question is, why should you learn about the ideas of ancient Jewish people in Roman Palestine? Why does the one seem natural and the other unreasonable? Radiant historiography is about re-imagining our relationship to the past and de-naturalizing that attachment, so that we can see its strangeness. Chin calls on Elaine Scarry's idea of an ethical and epistemic stance described as *ceding ground* to the other and the beautiful.<sup>5</sup> This is an act of imagination, perhaps also an act of wonder, which allows for separateness and difference. A scholar who can cede ground makes space for other stories to be told rather than just tidily buttoning the text into a spot among other puzzle pieces we ourselves cut.

Scholarship takes place in the present and along with other social practices like pedagogy, family, or reading. All of those practices are hinges between the past and the future. Both the past and the future are imaginary. So examination of the scholarly imaginary is not a decorous auxiliary activity for lady professors. It is a matter of moral and epistemic urgency. It is what allows us to tell honest stories about who we are and what we do not know.

### **Here is a Story about Knowledge and Narrative**

My last book was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation to re-interpret the lesson transcripts from the Tura papyri. Let me translate that sentence: The descendent of

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<sup>4</sup> C. M. Chin, "Marvelous Things Heard: On Finding Historical Radiance," *Massachusetts Review* 58.3 (2017), 478–491.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

displaced persons from World War II Poland and Germany was given money accumulated through weapons manufacturing and the enslavement of eastern Europeans including her own grandfather in order to study texts which were acquired by the West in the course of World War II. Both of these statements are correct, and both report a series of facts, but they have very different textures and weights, very different degrees of emotional, embodied and narrative legibility.

As I started my last book, I found it impossible to write the standard academic account of the papyri I was working with. According to convention, I should have written two or three paragraphs at the most, giving the physical details of the codices found at Tura in 1941, the number of pages, authorship, and genre, and so on. Some colleagues have made excellent tables of the content, size, and current location of various quires and folia of each codex, and that part of the job certainly has to be done.<sup>6</sup> Other colleagues have told the story of the find in disgustingly racist terms, imagining a scholarly relationship with the past such that when white people take papyri it is normal and natural, but when Arabs take papyri from their own country it is trickery or theft.<sup>7</sup>

Standard academic accounts of papyrological finds do epistemic and ethical work. They locate the texts in a find narrative which interacts with larger colonialist narratives about the direction and location and possession of real knowledge.<sup>8</sup> These accounts in turn interact with ways of imagining how and where knowledge happens, and which people are legitimate readers. Within that framework, it is not surprising to find a lot of racism. What was more surprising to me was that, in the very genre which wears the clothes and drinks the coffee of the disembodied transcendent rational and objective

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<sup>6</sup> See for example the introduction to Grant Bayliss, *The Vision of Didymus the Blind: A Fourth-Century Virtue-Origenism* (Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), doi: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198747895.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198747895.001.0001).

<sup>7</sup> Roger Pearse states "Around the start of August 1941 the British military authorities in Cairo sent a gang of native Egyptian workmen to clear some galleries in the stone-quarries of Tura, 10 miles from Cairo, in order to store munitions there. These discovered a pile of papyrus codices among the loose debris in one of the three galleries in quarry 35, around 20-25m from the entrance in the central rotunda. The books were not hidden, but simply buried under the rubble and dust of ages which reached almost a metre high at the sides of the tunnels. As such people do, they stole them all. The police and members of the Antiquities Service learned of the find on 10th August, but were too late to seize more than a small portion. Later still, portions of these books, quire by quire, began to be sold to the Cairo antiquities dealers and sold on at exorbitant prices. Much was purchased by the Egyptian museum; others remain in private hands. Rumors circulate that the ignorant workmen burned others for fuel, which Puech dismisses as a common folk-story in such cases; wilder rumors speak of thousands of pages." (Roger Pearse, "The Tura / Toura Discovery of Manuscripts (1941)," *Tertullian.org*, [tinyurl.com/2cjh27ua](http://tinyurl.com/2cjh27ua).)

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion, see Eva Mroczek, "True Stories and the Poetics of Textual Discovery," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 45.2 (2016), 21–31, doi:[10.1558/bsor.v45i2.28914](https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.v45i2.28914), and Brent Nongbri, *God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2018).

scholar we met a few minutes ago, which construes itself as precise and factual, I found an extraordinary number of factual mistakes. The find site was misrepresented, the scope of the military operation located there was invisible, and even in the case of the quire apparently purloined or purchased by an American soldier and sent to the US, the dates given for its (staged) re-discovery were not consistent. Each case of slippage and erasure served the upholding of a traditional Eurocentric narrative in which it is natural and inevitable for knowledge-objects to move from east to west and south to north, in which the east or south is not just far away but also long ago, an inert female body from which texts intermittently emerge to be hustled away to safety like Indigenous children being taken from their families and brought up in white boarding schools.<sup>9</sup>

The standard find story was an archival exile. What was being said was only a fragment of what could be said, and it was a story told by the captors. In the traditional narrative, there wasn't any room for a larger and more complex, a bigger, heavier, more textured story to be told. We could say, "These manuscripts were discovered near Tura in Egypt in 1941 in the course of surveying works by the British military." Then the reader has nothing but a flat button with nothing behind it, no way to respond. It is an account which resists engagement, perhaps deliberately. This form of the narrative invites me to consider it as merely incidental facts about the books I am about to read. It resists fiddling open the flat buttons it has offered. Such narratives generate an illusion of completeness and fixity and coherence which cannot possibly be the case.

When I wrote my own account, I wanted to open up space in the discourse to put the books in the truck, to make it possible for readers to travel the space between "I was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation to study the Tura papyri" and that other, more embodied, sentence. I wanted to wrestle open a space where a different kind of reception was possible, where the thing that happens when I say "I grew up in Papua New Guinea" would not happen to these books. That is what I was doing as a scholar: precisely that particular tender act of salvage.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than two or three paragraphs, I wrote forty-two pages. There is a small chapter for each point on the timeline where we have some sort of information which can be included. There is no gap between an embodied, mysterious East and a rational West.

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<sup>9</sup> The foundation for the naturalization of the east-to-west movement of knowledge can be found in G. W. F. Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Leipzig: Joseph Anton Goebhardt: 1807).

<sup>10</sup> This shift is still entirely inadequate, because I am not Egyptian and those manuscripts do not belong to me. My strategy of story-telling around these manuscripts should not be taken as a solution to the problem of the interaction of racism and coloniality with manuscript finds. The most I can do from the already-wrong state of unwarranted possession to these manuscripts is to de-naturalise that situation and de-universalise myself as a scholar.

Everybody in the narrative introduction has a body, and women, children, migrants, and people of colour are a large part of the story. The text moves from Didymus to me not by any natural organic relationship nor in a linear manner. It travels on the backs and in the trucks and on the donkeys and over the shelves of specific people in specific places at specific times, each of whom is reading in a different way and for a different reason, none of whom have any knowledge of me nor any intention to pass these specific books to this specific displaced woman. My telling of that story is still wrong, because those are still someone else's books. Ancient books exist like exiles within multiple stories which may or may not clash with each other.

Telling the story of the find in this way was an enormous amount of work. I had to use a lot of different ways of thinking, including not only gathering and arranging information coherently and aesthetically, but also intuition, imagination, social skill (trying to get people to tell me stuff they had previously kept to themselves), detective skill (trying to identify the mysterious brother-in-law), and geographical learning (reading military maps and learning about limestone mining to be able to understand the find site). That chapter was a lot more work than all the other more traditionally academic chapters, and it required a lot more collaboration and correction as well. Writing the story of these manuscripts as creative non-fiction meant I had to give myself to learning rather than raise a claim to mastery. One wonders exactly what small work goes into repeating the catechism of the master.

Telling the story as a chronological and contingent narrative required me to de-homogenize a lot of things: Egypt unfolded to include Jews, Armenians, prisoners, soldiers, monks, scholars, children, women, builders, British mapmakers. Which is to say it became a real place and not a placeholder in the prescribed Western narrative. The codices themselves unfolded from a solid knot behind the word "Tura find," into a diffuse and unresolved archive spread out all over the world, much of which is still at large. Even my own person shattered into several different places in the timeline, from the little girl trying to get to school without being able to see properly, to the woman starting the book, the woman finishing the book, but more than that, to me writing beyond my own ability to control what I had created. My rebellion against the colonialist account of the find was achieved by a precise but prolific and disquieting fragmentation of entities and places, by writing so as to include many different bodies, to include vulnerability and uncertainty in the archive, to write with devotion but without mastery.

Theoretically speaking, we are now standing in an interesting place, because the way I have told the story is not the manner of writing history which is associated with historical accuracy, and yet the way I wrote it is certainly more accurate than the traditional way which erases almost everything from the story, including its own nature

as narrative. The things it is possible to know are possible, and possible in a particular way, because of which narrative we live in, which narrative the text lives in, and whether the stories of ourselves and the texts are treated as separate or identical.

### **Here is a Story about Contingency and Archives**

Narrative generates completeness and erases contingency. It causes ambivalent occasions to settle into a definite spot and point themselves at a particular goal. Traditional historical narratives serve the self-imagining of the white West by telling stories in which books are all part a western archive and every archive is part of a story about Europe.

Harriet Bradley writes that “in the archive, there lingers an assurance of concreteness, objectivity, recovery and wholeness.”<sup>11</sup> Which is to say, the archive has the same problem that Hayden White considered narratives to have.<sup>12</sup> They both name the object of desire for the Western episteme. The appetite for knowledge can only be satisfied by total, fixed, unimpeachable and properly resolved entities arranged in a likewise total, fixed, and unimpeachable order. Such lubriciously restricted systems of desire, when they appear a little closer to the body than books, are called fetishes.

A timeline is not a line. It is a jumble of tragedies and mysteries which should not even be construed as a series. It's just hard for us to think of several items occurring one after another as not occurring in a sequence and standing in a meaningful relationship to each other. But that is a fact about our brains, not one about the world.

I only wrote the book I wrote about the Tura papyri because of which people, including my own European grandparents, stayed alive during World War II. We only have the lesson transcripts because of World War II, otherwise no one would have been clearing those caves at all. I only figured out that they were lesson transcripts and not commentaries because of the dissertation I wrote which a certain Swedish grad student read, who then got me invited to a certain workshop, where a specific colleague working in California made an off-hand comment about grammar. This new book only exists because of that, and because of me having the research money to follow it up, money which came from the Thyssen Foundation which again made its money through weapons manufacture and the exploitation of forced laborers like my grandfather in World War II.

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<sup>11</sup> Harriet Bradley, “The Seductions of the Archive: Voices Lost and Found,” *History of the Human Sciences* 12.2 (1999), 117, doi:[10.1177/09526959922120270](https://doi.org/10.1177/09526959922120270).

<sup>12</sup> Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary History,” *History and Theory* 23.1 (1984), 1–33, doi:[10.2307/2504969](https://doi.org/10.2307/2504969).

And yet in the available patterns for talking about these papyri, there is only an incidental relationship to World War II hidden under the statement of the date in a participial phrase: found in 1941.

A link marked “archive” in digital space means access to all previous instances of the same thing: previous blog posts, previous newsletters, previous announcements of institutional events, filed in an orderly fashion under evenly spaced dates. That reveals very tellingly how we *imagine* the archive but is very different from the archive that we actually have. The Tura papyri were mis-catalogued as commentaries, because a Christian doing something with the Bible was assumed to be like a previous instance of the thing we see Christians doing with the Bible later on or elsewhere. There was an erasure of difference which made very obvious facts, like the presence of 300 student questions, invisible or meaningless. Even though the earliest discussions of the find noted the difference of the Psalms and Ecclesiastes from the commentaries, the series in which they were published started naming each work as commentary and, by the logic of publishing in series, could not name these two different works something different, so again their difference was erased. This little corner of the archive was built around the unwillingness of scholars to fight with committees or complicate relations with publishers.

Communities form around archives. Archives function like a crossroads or a good well or the fertile ground around a river, where it is possible to settle and pitch our tents. The sixteen-year-old me, going back and forth to the shelves in the public library was like the women in my village in the highlands, going out from the village to work the fields each morning, coming back each evening with the day's haul of sweet potato, that which was needful to nourish oneself and one's family. But we also form communities around texts across time. We organize ourselves, through social practices of graduate seminars and conferences and summer schools, into settlements of nomads drinking from a particular well. We form friendships around loving the same books, eating the same ideas.

Nothing has surprised me more in being re-displaced to the West than the blitheness with which the Western world hoards its epistemic talismans and fetishes, but fails to see itself as at all superstitious. These ideas make sense to me in the same way that in my village it made sense to me that women must not touch weapons or they will deprive said weapons of their force. Since I live inside contradictory stories, that is both plausible and entirely ridiculous. I want to suggest to you that you re-imagine the Western episteme as a tribal fetish and the narrative of progress towards rationality and control as a savage mythology. We sit around fires and tell ourselves stories about how the world is orderly and naturally amenable to our supremacy, we sing songs about fixed taxonomies and circumscribed entities, about the eternal unchanging nature of things.

When we write, we do the work of our species in honouring the ancestors and guarding our patrimony. This is only natural, and I have nothing but compassion for the desire to be part of a legible story and belong somewhere. But we need to know that we are writing about the past in order to feed ourselves; we need to know our own loves and desires, to know which camp around the river we have pitched our tent in, which story we are part of and which body we live in. We need to know when and where and how we have imagined knowledge of other people's texts as our very own patrimony.

### **Coda**

The Psalm I opened with shifts from longing for the past to violent rage, the exiles calling down curses upon their captors. Efforts to tell one's own story, whether popular or academic, are currently also met with the rage of the captors who hate to give up narrative control. But before that grief shifts into rage, a question is posed: *How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?* That question itself is a verse in a song. That song has been sung everywhere from Babylon to the Caribbean to the Americas to Cambridge, splintering into Jewish, Black, Southern white and white European receptions. The Babylon of Jewish exile has been re-told as the state of oppression faced by Black people in the Caribbean and the Americas, the biblical narrative wrested away from white American captors who saw themselves as the chosen people and America as their white Zion.

I kept migrating and learned that most of the world is at home in archival grief. I kept migrating and came upon communities in which most people are displaced. And I started to work in a discipline split between people who see the Christian past as their homeland and those who see it as a world in which stories and knowledge and books are always moving, in which both the past and future are constantly re-told, in which we are all struggling to write ourselves into stories of homecoming.

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