Iphigeneia Breathes: A Filmic Musing on the Winds, Breathing, Life, and the Imagination

By Andrea Eis* 

Artistic inspiration drawn from both scholarly and experiential research has led me to incorporate a particular approach to classical reception into my art films: while rereading the text itself from different perspectives, I also imagine new endings for old stories. Imagination becomes a powerfully direct element in my films, especially when combined their bases in my personal experience of Greece and scholarly research into aspects of Greek myths, plays, and language. Perhaps (2017) asks viewers to imagine Clytemnestra’s actions before Agamemnon’s return from Troy, and how she might have used the power of the female gaze to enact her revenge and possibly change her own fate. Iphigeneia Breathes (2021) reimagines Euripides’s Iphigeneia at Aulis to change Iphigeneia’s fate. Harnessing the communal power of the warrior’s voices and breathing, Iphigeneia’s leadership brings the winds, and changes the course of history. While working on this film, its breathing theme became unexpectedly entwined with contemporary events: George Floyd, saying he could not breathe, was murdered; the pandemic stole breath from millions of people; and loud, close-packed crowds became a terrifying reality as a source of death. My process, research, approach to reception and imagination ultimately brought contemporary experience into interaction with ancient narrative.

Introduction

As an art filmmaker with an academic background in ancient Greek, a feminist mind-set, and a stubbornly optimistic view that we can still learn from both the wisdom and the mistakes of the ancient Greeks, my work has revolved around feminist reinterpretations of Greek plays and myths, re-visioned in contemporary images. My films surface from the mélange of multiple methods of research: reading Greek plays, defining specific elements that are key to their narratives, and engaging my own visual and aural senses with the eternal aspects of Greek landscape and natural forms, and the power of ancient sites.

Most of my films have been “at a remove”— the reinterpretation and re- visioning happens in the third person, my authorship concealed in the voice of the characters. With two of my films, Perhaps (2017) and Iphigeneia Breathes (2022), I broke that mold. I personalize my reception of the myths and plays, stating rather than implying my perspective, bringing my contemporary experience into interaction with ancient narratives, and imagining different endings. As the filmmaker, I can draw the viewer into my perspective, not only with visual

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direction, but also with my words, my emphases, my invitations to imagination.

*Perhaps:* An Experiment in Filmmaker’s Perspective and Imagination

A Misnamed Tholos Tomb Spurs the Imagination

*Perhaps* was an experimental precursor to my techniques in the later *Iphigeneia Breathes*, of inserting my filmmaker’s perspective, and using imagination as a spur to content. The catalysts for my imagination in *Perhaps* came from personal experience at the ancient site of Mycenae.

In several trips over the years, I have visited the so-called “Tomb of Agamemnon” at Mycenae. Its connection to Agamemnon was incorrectly asserted by people as varied as Pausanias in the second century AD, and Heinrich Schliemann in the 1870s and its alternative naming as the Treasury of Atreus is also an incorrect identification. Regardless of attribution, the tholos tomb has a powerful physical presence, visually and emotionally. The architecture is impressive and awe-inspiring, impassive and serene (Figure 1). Because I have been lucky enough to be there at several times when no other people were in the tholos, I have spent solitary time musing on the reverberant space. I filmed and photographed the space (Figure 2), without knowing exactly how I would use the footage and photographs, or what story I would tell.

![Figure 1. “Tomb of Agamemnon” (Original in Color)](image)

*Source:* Photograph by Andrea Eis.
Certain aspects captured in my photographs eventually became the specific catalysts for rethinking Clytemnestra. The floor is an element rarely even mentioned in descriptions of the tomb, and easy to overlook in the powerful presence of the rest. I was particularly intrigued by an image of the rough, uneven floor (Figure 3), and eventually was able to bring that visual detail into a prologue *Perhaps*. I also pondered the mysterious inaccessibility of the small side chamber (Figure 4) where the burials were actually made, but that we are not allowed to enter. In *Perhaps*, Clytemnestra has other options.
I thought about the years of burials in the tomb, and how those buried there might have been treated. A portion of the resulting script mixes my filmmaker’s perspective, my musings on unstable intersections, errors, and later pronouncements of archaeologists, my experiences in the tomb, and the filmic conjurings of my own mind into an imaginative commentary on what Clytemnestra might have planned. Footage overlooks the dromos from above the tomb as I ponder how rejecting the Agamemnon attribution ends up not nearly as intriguing as believing it is the actual “Tomb of Agamemnon,” a place that would have been a powerful source of interest to Clytemnestra. With a point-of-view walk along the curved inner wall, I take the viewer through “the tholos tomb that is not Agamemnon’s.” In an exultant voiceover, I invite the viewer to imagine Clytemnestra there, if this had been a tomb to be used for Agamemnon:
Archaeologists have determined that this is not the tomb of Agamemnon.

I understand that.

It’s not that I don’t get it.

But can’t you just see Clytemnestra there?

Can’t you just imagine her having them clear the dirt from the path, having them pull open those doors, having them push aside the previous king — who was powerful, as powerful as Agamemnon, but just a man, and so he died.

She would have had him pushed aside, and have the floor swept, and made ready for Agamemnon.¹

The voiceover here, and at other times throughout the film, includes sections of doubled readings. The versions have, at times, slightly different wording in the text, and are set slightly off sync from each other. It is as if the story constantly changes, with unstable references to the past, which itself has already been imagined. Even the filmmaker does not have the ability to state the truth, only to present the options.

A Crumbled Palace Wall is Transformed, and Imagination Changes Everything

Based on my experiential research, I had been able to imagine Clytemnestra’s preparations for the return of her murdering husband, giving me the starting point for the film. However, it was archaeological knowledge gave me its end point.

I knew that part of the megaron at Mycenae, the throne room, is now seen as reconstructed (Figure 5). Due to earthquakes that devastated the Mycenaean palace in the late 13th century BCE, the area where archaeologists thought the throne would have been placed had crumbled and fallen into the Havos ravine, southwest of the megaron. Along with the wall and the floor, the king’s throne had fallen. An uninspiring fragment of the throne was recovered in 2014, from where it was buried in the ravine, most of it has been lost over time. For me, however, the personally and archaeologically disappointing emptiness in place of that throne was still enough to spur another imaginative encounter with Clytemnestra for my film.

I used my knowledge about the crumbled palace wall in an epilogue in the film, to enable me to narrate a new return home for Agamemnon. Clytemnestra’s vengeance would take another route. She would not tangle Agamemnon in a net and stab him in the bath.

The south side of the megaron—where, archaeologists think, Agamemnon’s throne had stood—it all crumbled, fell into the ravine. The stone seat, the beaten earth floor, that whole side of the megaron.
Perhaps Clytemnestra knew that her stare,
after so many years of waiting,
had loosened the supporting wall.
Perhaps Clytemnestra knew that, if she waited,
her act would prove unnecessary.

She stared at that mountain, beyond that room,
listening for the rumble of the collapse.²

The combination of archaeological knowledge and archaeologists’ suppositions, the power of place, and my imagination, had led me to envision Clytemnestra anew. In this film, I would make the female gaze the instrument of power.

Iphigeneia Breathes:
Research, Experience, and Expanding the Power of the Imagination

On Pronunciation

My recent film, Iphigeneia Breathes (2021), narrates aspects of Euripides’ Iphigeneia in Aulis, but turns in a different direction. A personal experience about learning the modern Greek pronunciation of Iphigeneia’s name led to a revelation of creating an alternate ending, one growing directly from that modern Greek knowledge. The film centers on the intertwined physicality of the human voice, human breathing, and the winds.

I accompanied theatre and filmmaking students from Oakland University on a study abroad trip in 2019 to the island of Hydra, where they rehearsed an adaptation of Euripides’ Orestes on the island of Hydra, for a performance in a small outdoor amphitheatre (Figure 6). The director, Karen Sheridan, wrote the adaptation of Orestes³ that the students performed. She asked a Greek actor, Stathis Grapsas, to train the students in the modern Greek pronunciation of the ancient Greek names in the play, since most of the audience would be Greek.

While I was a classics major in undergraduate school, I had learned to say Iphigeneia with a tight, hard pronunciation: *If-i-je-NI-a*. You can breathe out, empty your lungs, and still get her name said. I learned that in the modern Greek pronunciation, her name is soft and lyrical: *if-ee-YEN-yah*. You **have** to breathe out

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4Phonetic spelling as noted in Euripides, *Iphigeneia at Aulis* (2012), 110.
to say it. It is the breathing required by saying Iphigeneia’s name that spurred a rethinking of my film, but I did not sort out how that could change her story until months later, as I researched another Greek word.

Experiential Research – Physical Palimpsests of Greece

I have spent a great deal of time in Greece over many years, often in rural areas on islands. I have become engrossed with the way that natural elements can connect me to Greece’s ancient past, and have employed these connections in my films. The natural world of Greece makes up nearly all of the images in Iphigeneia Breathes, from the constant flow of the sea, to the variations on fluttering, stilled, and dying flowers, the visual effects of the winds, and the intense cicada songs. For films without traditional scripts and dialogue, these elements often serve as objective correlates suggesting thoughts, emotions, and ideas. The mountains and trees, the winds and waves, the birds and cicadas—they also appear or sound as they did in ancient Greece, so the experience of being in Greece is continually connected to the layers of its past. The myths inhabit the same place as we do.

Linguistic and Textual Research

Linguistic and textual research are also significant in the meaning, imagery, and construction of my Iphigeneia film. I started with reading multiple translations of Greek plays and epics, and doing my own translations of certain key passages. I delved into detailed analyses of Greek words that seem to relate to my ideas. Conversely, I use the study of specific Greek words to generate ideas. For Iphigeneia Breathes, the research at times forms only a latent subtext; at other times, it serves as a central element in the meaning of the film.

Experiencing the strong presence of the winds on Greeks mountains and islands spurred me to look into “wind” as a generative idea for a film. I had long known the story, from various sources, of the warriors headed for Troy being stalled at Aulis, due to issues with the winds. This story led me to begin researching various Greek words for wind, including a fascination with ten Homeric words for various kinds of winds, from breezes to blasts: “The semantic range of Homeric wind is broad, ranging from the most neutral and pervasive term, ἄνεμος (wind), to πνοή (breath, breeze, blast), αὔρῃ (breeze), οὖρος (favorable wind for sailing), ἀντινή/ἀντμήν (breath of wind), ὀπτή (rush of wind), ἀτης (blast), ἀέλλη (whirling or stormy wind), θύελλα (rushing stormwind), λαῖλαψ (storm).”

A discovery central to Iphigeneia Breathes was that one of the non-Homeric words for wind, πνεῦμα (pneuma), was used for a myriad of other meanings as

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well: breathing, life, breath, spirit, the air we breathe. All of these come into my film, some foregrounded, and some buried within it. The poetic concatenation of meanings, the linguistic fusion of human qualities and the power of nature, along with the modern Greek pronunciation of a name, are all keys to my Iphigeneia film.

Besides the linguistic interest of wind words, cicadas had become a strong, fascinating aural presence for me in Greece. The cicada (τέττιξ) origin myth was that cicadas were originally men who were so enthralled with the singing of the Muses that they forgot to eat or drink, and so they died. The Muses, in turn, brought these men back as cicadas. This past life explanation generated a reasoning for the unusual insects, who only surface after 13 or 17 years, and who sing continuously while alive. Recording their songs on one of my trips to Greece, led me to do some side research into the ancient Greeks’ attitude towards cicadas. Of particular interest to me was Socrates noting “the charm of their Siren voices” in Plato’s Phaedrus, an opinion not held by many who currently experience cicadas led me to use the aural pattern of cicada song in Iphigeneia Breathes. The connections of cicadas with life and death, as well as the specific role that they take on after death, of telling the Muses who the men are who honor them on earth, became unexpressed subtexts to the life and death struggles in the film, and to Agamemnon honoring the goddess Artemis by sacrificing his daughter.

Embodiment: The Fusion of Speech and Physical Action

In the simplest explanation of its manifestation, human speech is always embodied, in the sense that the work of the body is necessary to make speech heard; the written word is similarly embodied in the actions needed to create letters and words. The power that language has over physical actions, and the cascading results of those actions, are clear in Euripides’ Iphigeneia in Aulis: Calchas’s prophecy spurs Agamemnon’s duplicitous letter to Clytemnestra, telling her to bring their daughter Iphigeneia to Aulis, where she will supposedly marry Achilles; after pleading with her father for her life, Iphigenia articulates her change of attitude, and agrees to be sacrificed for Greece.

In Iphigeneia Breathes, it would be the modern Greek pronunciation of Iphigeneia’s name that would ultimately shifts human speech into a literally embodied force of change. It is the breathing required by her name that spurred my idea for the film, and that I eventually used to change her story. I explain and use both pronunciations in the film.

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The Arc from *Iphigeneia at Aulis* to *Iphigeneia Breathes*

**Returning to the Voice of the Filmmaker**

As I started work on an Iphigeneia film, I began rethinking my original film script, based so heavily in Euripides’ *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. Did I really want to just retell the narrative of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* as it was, or was this another opportunity for imagining something else—or should it be both? Ultimately, I conceived the film in a structure alternating contemporary and ancient storytelling, as well as switching back and forward in time within the ancient story. The film does retell portions of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, with some expanded repetitions including different elements, with elements suggesting the filmmaker’s commentary and musings in the voiceovers. The intertwining of past and present in the film, culling elements from Euripides and others based on personal experience, I eventually formed my imaginative revision from the intersection of the winds, human breathing, and life, from a mélange of imagery from the natural world, and from the Greek language, ancient and modern. The film’s interlaced structure and content reflects the serpentine path of scholarly and experiential research that led me to imagine a new ending, and as the imagined possibility surfaces in the film, I make the possibility “happen.”

**Telling the Story: Structure and Content**

After a short prologue on the various words expressed by πνεῦμα—which also sets up the pattern of variations on a theme—a voiceover representing the filmmaker’s experience on an island narrates the blowing and stilling of winds, the silence and cicadas. The words play over shots that are mostly opposite in imagery and audio (such as trees blowing in the wind while the voiceover talks about the winds being stilled). These types of oppositions recur throughout the film, implying the fluidity of perception and a questioning of knowledge and experience, opening an aperture for imagination.

With an intertitle, the film is pulled back to “thousands of years earlier.” While the viewer watches a darkened sea roiling in hypnotic, slow-motion waves (Figure 7), an omniscient voiceover narrates of the story of the warriors waiting for the winds, Agamemnon’s ruse to get Iphigeneia to Aulis, Iphigeneia finally agreeing to be sacrificed, and the warriors sailing to Troy. It ends with thousands of Greeks and Trojans dying.
With a vocal change of tone, the narration moves into first-person, explaining new knowledge, the modern Greek pronunciation of Iphigeneia’s name (“a soft exhalation, gliding forward”), which is contrasted with Iphigeneia first being reluctantly “propelled” towards sacrifice, and her sudden change of heart, after which she agrees to be sacrificed⁸:

[Iphigeneia], on the other hand, was propelled forward.  
Until she takes things into her own hands,  
and chooses her death.

   Heroically.  
   For Greece.  
   Supposedly.⁹

Matched with a close-up of a chaotic pile of intensely colored flowers, spread in across the frame on a rough stone wall, the lines of the voiceover punctuate a series of dissolves, as one by one the flowers disappear, in reverse, until there are none left by the end, and we are left only with the rough stone wall upon which they had been spread. This slow visual and aural slow march to death is followed by a defense of Helen, the alleged cause of this need for Iphigeneia’s sacrifice.

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⁸In Iphigeneia Changes Her Mind (1991), Sausone discusses Aristotle “notoriously” averring, in his Poetics, that Iphigeneia’s tragic character shows inconsistency by changing her mind (161). The author then discusses opposing theories that find a wide variety of reasonable dramatic motivations for Iphigeneia’s seemingly discordant decision to die for Greece (161-62).

Footage of waves roll diagonally across the frame softly but inexorably, during a voiceover speaking of the pronunciation of Helen’s name in modern Greek, which, similarly to Iphigeneia’s name, softer and more lyrical (eh-LAY-nee) than in ancient Greek. Cicadas compete with the voiceover. An assertion follows that neither Iphigeneia nor the warriors are sacrificed for Eleni’s sake, who “never asks for any of this,” as the camera pans over fallen flowers, the cropped into a thin horizontal slice trapped within a black frame. Helen’s lack of culpability takes on even more resonance in a later scene on Agamemnon’s motivations.

We return to the warriors at Aulis, and their increasing impatience with the long wait for the winds, their seething frustration. In this sequence, as with much of the imagery in the film, nature images serve as objective correlatives, physical representations for thoughts, emotions, ideas. A softly lit, peaceful, almost mythical white horse, wanders through a golden field and stops at the edge of a sunken wall of haphazardly placed stones. The horse calmly raises its head for a moment (Figure 8), almost as if responding to a small ruffle of wind, then drops it again to sniff at the ground. (Voiceover: “To the warriors waiting at Aulis, the stilling of the winds was a relief. At first.”) The camera then explores more unsettled imagery—a tangle of plants, weeds silhouetted against dramatic backlit clouds, and a flower in high contrast, protected by a ring of spiky thorns, and shaking anxiously, as if in direct correlation to the warriors’ intense emotions (Figure 9).

Figure 8. A Still of the Horse Responding to a Breeze (Original in Color)
Source: Cinematography by Andrea Eis.
This passage focusing on the warriors’ emotions leads to the one speaking of Agamemnon’s motives and ambition. Starting small within the frame of a large black field, waves roll relentlessly towards the viewer, as the image slowly increases in size, to fill the frame, ending with a fade out as the scope of the resulting tragedy unfolds.

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\text{For Agamemnon,} \\
\text{the sacrifice of} \\
\text{his daughter’s life is necessary.} \\
\text{To get those warriors moving.} \\
\text{To give them their reason for being.} \\
\text{To give him his reason for leading.} \\
\text{They rush forward} \\
\text{to what, for many,} \\
\text{is the sacrifice of their lives.} \\
\text{Sacrificed for Agamemnon.} \\
\text{For Menelaus.}^{10}
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The camera pans across the folds of a crumpled bedsheets. The palpable sound of the cicadas, though not heard on the soundtrack at this point, is referenced in the voiceover as “a physical weight, a temporal wait.” Vividly pink

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\text{Eis, “Voiceover,” in Iphigeneia Breathes [film] (Toughened Glass Films, 2021), 7:05-7:36.}
flowers interact with the path of the voiceover to suggest the beauty, power, and fragility of life, and the inevitability of death, as they are held, softly crushed, dropped on a white bedspread, and then set in a line.

Wait.
For Agamemnon
to sacrifice one woman —
a girl, really —
so a goddess will restore the winds.
So they can sail to Troy.
The songs of the cicadas are abundant.
Insistent.¹¹

A black frame fills the screen, as a voiceover invites the viewer to use their imagination:

Just suppose.
Just imagine.
If it had been different.¹²

And what to imagine? Iphigeneia gives the warriors a different task. She has them say her name over and over, like an incantation—in the modern Greek pronunciation, so that they have to breathe out. With thousands of warriors, and thousands of repetitions of her name, a wind is created that fills the sails.

Imagination Breaks through a Barrier

Wind in bodies is called breath, outside bodies it is called air. It is the most powerful of all [bodily nourishments] and it is in all, and it is worthwhile examining its power...[it is] invisible to sight, though visible to reason. For what can take place without it? In what is it not present? What does it not accompany?¹³

At first, I did not go as far with the film’s narrative as to imagine Iphigeneia changing the course of history when she leads the incantation, other than saving herself from sacrifice. However, this film became embedded in my present in ways I did not expect. In my mind, the impact of multiple traumas in the world became inextricably connected with my film. In May of 2020, George Floyd, pleading to the police that he could not breathe, was slowly, painfully, contemptuously murdered. For a long period of time, I had to stop working on Iphigeneia Breathes. I did not know how to continue making a film about breathing.

¹³Hippocrates, Volume II Prognostic (Harvard University Press, 1923), 229-231.
after George Floyd had that precious ability imperiously stolen from him. The pandemic was increasing relentlessly, also stealing people’s abilities to breathe, until ventilators were their only hope, and then of no hope. And thousands in closely packed crowds, performing their own intense incantations, became terrifying and dangerous forces.

What brought me back to editing, to finishing the film, was a re-visioning of my re-visioning. Could the assembled warriors, saying Iphigeneia’s name repeatedly and with increasing intensity, be led to realize that there was a choice to be made? Could I use the embodied word as a literal breath of life? By shifting the results of breathing to a positive result—the warriors heading home instead of to Troy—I could imagine a past in which war was avoided, people were not sacrificed because of the beliefs of others, or because people wanted to use their power over others. Perhaps, just perhaps, a new outcome could be the result of the actions of a woman taking on a leadership role. My improbably optimistic but realistically questioning perspective formed the final message.

**A Man’s Voice, a Woman’s Voice, and Hope**

The viewer is invited to join with me in imagining, the warriors’ incantation of Iphigeneia’s name, tied to the words of wind, and echoing:

**Soft If-ee-YEN-ya.s.**

**Nearly silent If-ee-YEN-ya.s.**

**Great gusts of If-ee-YEN-ya.s.**

**A surge of If-ee-YEN-ya.s.**

All of them breathing,

as one.

The sails fill with their voices,

their breathing.

While she, of the lyrical breathing name,

will herself be able to continue breathing.\(^{14}\)

Over a “sea” of agave plants, their leaves elegantly curved but edged with thorns (Figure 10), with the “abundant, persistent” cicadas on the soundtrack, the possibilities emerge:

**And maybe, when the embodied winds die down,**

If-ee-YEN-ya says her name again.

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If a man’s voice can send them to war, 
perhaps a woman’s voice can turn them towards home.

If-ee-YEN-ya would not die.

Thousands would not die.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{center}
Figure 10. A Still of the Agave Plants (Original in Color) \\
Source: Cinematography by Andrea Eis.
\end{center}

The cicadas fade out, the sounds of waves fade in, there are three more, magic-suggestive repetitions of if-ee-YEN-ya. The cicada sound returns, and intertitles appear:

Thousands of years later.

Sitting by the water 
on an island in Greece

I imagine

that
Iphigeneia
breathes.\textsuperscript{16}

The film ends with sea glass being gathered up and then dropped from my hand in slow motion (Figure 11), visualizing the past in the shards of glass whose

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid, 9:28-10:01.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid, 10:37-10:45.
edges have been smoothed by water and time. The heightened intensity of the slow-motion sound of the falling glass, is a rare synchronous audio passage, and it lasts after the image has faded out.

Figure 11. Still from the Shot of Sea Glass Dropping (Original in Color)
Source: Cinematography by Andrea Eis.

Conclusion

The embodiment of Iphigeneia’s name in the warriors’ breaths changes history, and the Trojan War never happens—because a woman takes steps to change fate. In this telling, embodied language, in a word that is inseparably connected with breathing, living, and the wind, saves Iphigeneia’s life, and that of thousands of Greeks and Trojans. I found my way to take on the pain that was everywhere in the world around me, making a film about changing a mythic past. My film, finally finished in December of 2021, serves as an embodiment of my fragile hope for a better future, imagined and acted upon.

My journey through Iphigeneia’s story as a filmmaker was accompanied by a complex mix of scholarly, experiential, linguistic, and textual research, but also by unexpected personal emotional intensity, the contexts of which are not referenced for viewers. As an artist, I know that I cannot control the connotations or associations of my work, and I should not expect to. At best, I construct and frame my own perspective and craft a significance for my images and words with which I can live.

In 1998, Robert Andreach, writing about Ellen McLaughlin’s Iphigeneia and Other Daughters, said that McLaughlin reinvents and re-centers Greek plays. I found a kinship for my film in Andreach’s explanation for how McLaughlin
changes the perspective of the plays in more than one way:

The first is that for history to change, its victims – those excluded from it or sacrificed to it – must act. The second is that they do not have to act with the motivation of the dominant culture…

Killing does not have to be the sole reason for wanting to create history.\(^{17}\)

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Bibliography


