

# Potential History

Unlearning Imperialism

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VERSO  
London • New York

First published by Verso 2019  
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

**Verso**

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG  
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201  
versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-571-1  
ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-570-4 (HBK)  
ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-573-5 (US EBK)  
ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-572-8 (UK EBK)

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in Minion by MJ&N Gavan, Truro, Cornwall  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

# Preface

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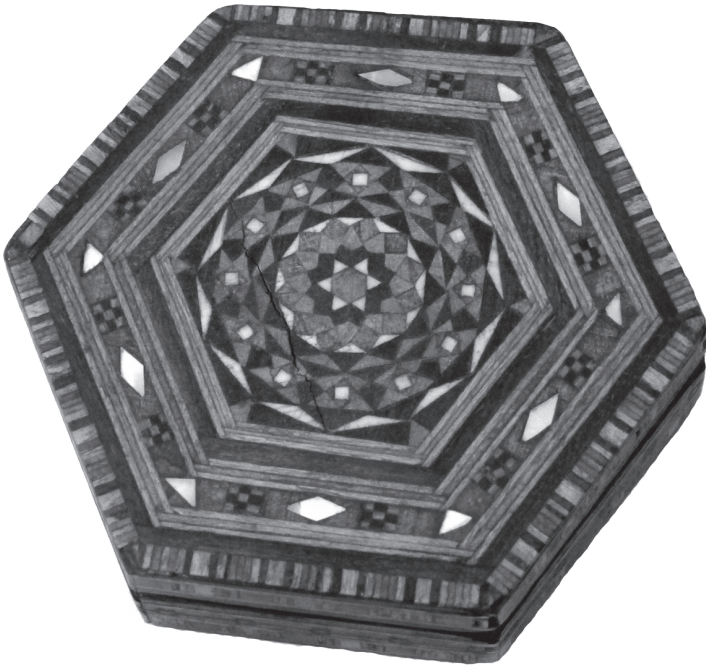
I would have loved to have been part of an identity group. I wish I could have been able to say that I belong to “my community.” But there is no community to which I truly belong. Here is my proof.

I own many objects and artifacts and some works of art. None of these, even those I inherited from my parents or received as gifts from family and friends, were handed to me as a recognition of my belonging. I have not a thing from Oran, Algeria, where my father and his ancestors were born and lived until the late 1940s. I have nothing from Spain, from where my mothers’ ancestors were expelled in 1492. I do not even have their immaterial belongings, like Ladino, the language Jews spoke in Spain and passed down to their children for generations. Ladino did not become mine because my mother, who had been born in Palestine, was turned from a Palestinian Jew into an “Israeli” at the age of nineteen. She was induced by the newly constituted state to forget all languages except Hebrew. My mother did not talk with me in her mother tongue, nor did my father in his. I was born “Israeli” by default and was raised to be a member of the state’s Jewish community. This nation-state project of becoming naturally born Israeli was meant to replace prior imperial visions of belonging and unbelonging to communities destroyed or shaped with violence, while being projected on and through my body. I do not recall all of them, but in addition to the 1492 expulsion, I can mention the occupation of Algeria in 1830, the Crémieux decree of 1870, the rule of Vichy France in Algeria in 1941, and UN Resolution 181 in 1947 that unleashed the destruction of Palestine.

This book was written as part of my refusal to be an “Israeli,” to think like an Israeli, to identify myself as an Israeli, or to be recognized as an Israeli. I refuse partly because being an Israeli means being

entitled to stolen lands and the property of others. I do not refuse, however, to assume the implications of this perpetrator's position that I inherited and out of and against which this book has been written. My refusal is now embodied by the onto-epistemological political imaginary that this book stages, in which the potentiality of being a Palestinian Jew, let alone an Algerian Jew, is not foreclosed. Before 1948, there was nothing extraordinary in this pair of words: "Palestinian Jews." But with the insane project to destroy Palestine, which was unleashed in 1947 and has not yet come to an end, today this coupling of Jew and Palestinian, and the status it indicates, sounds like an aberration. My refusal doesn't try to dream up a new category. It is rather a refusal to accept that our predecessors' dreams—not necessarily our parents', but their parents' or grandparents'—can no longer be ours, as if the three tenses of past, present, and future that separate us and fix us in different eras were not invented exactly for this purpose.

The only material object to which I'm attached is not mine. It will never be mine. This photograph of an empty wooden box is included in this book, for the slight chance that relatives of its owners might recognize and claim it. It belongs to its owners, but it is also an object of a potential history. This is why a few years ago, I entrusted myself with



this box to help claim the existence of a different world, one where violence that ought not to have happened could be unimaginable again. In the midst of the violence that the 1947 partition plan unleashed, in the proximity of this box, Jews and Arabs exchanged mutual promises of cooperation to hold the world-destroying violence at bay. These promises were broken, but not by those who exchanged them; they were violated by Jewish militias. The Arab village was invaded and many of its inhabitants were massacred. The future of this violence that was made past should be aborted.

When I moved to the United States in 2013 and joined the faculty at Brown University, I felt how easily one could be drawn into the fast-forward project of the neoliberal American university. Surrounded here by the wealth of objects, documents, images, and resources available in public and private museums, archives and universities, I soon felt obliged to delve into the study of worlds that the accumulation and dubious ownership of such wealth helped to destroy. This was a natural expansion of my interest in the potential history of Palestine and its destruction. I came to understand that the structural deferral of reparations for slavery was the organizing principle of imperial political regimes as well as the intellectual wealth of universities. The challenge became how not to become imperialism's ambassador and not to normalize the privileged access to these objects offered to scholars, and rather to recognize others' rights to and in them.

Out of my commitment to the radical return of Palestine and to a radical negation of "the past" that operates as a way to shut down potential history and close shut the wooden box I had opened to think with, in writing this book I found myself changing scales. Instead of focusing on several decades in the history of Palestine, my research came to span centuries and to cross the globe, dictated by the history of imperialism. Without undermining differences between places, situations, and lived experiences, I tried to use this change of scale to consolidate an anti-imperial onto-epistemological framework through which everything and every place affected by western imperialism could be thought together.

These changes in scale helped me to further elaborate the political ontology of photography (a subject to which I dedicated several books) and to account for it as a central part of imperial technology. Photography, in this sense, is irreducible to the invention of a scopic device. The thrust-forward rhythm of the click of the camera's shutter acts like

a verdict—a very limited portion of information is captured, framed, and made appropriable by those who become its rights holders. The verdict–shutter is common to other imperial technologies and was in use prior to the invention of the camera.

There is, however, an excess of information not processed, left illegible, but nonetheless there, since others besides the photographers were and still are also present and left their marks on the scene. I realized that the best way to access this *undercurrent photographic data* is to trace the images with a pencil or with scissors, without inhabiting the expected spectator position—that is, to refuse to be the photographer. The results of this experimental effort appear throughout the book as a series of images that may look like drawings. It is, however, more accurate to see them as attempts to trace this undercurrent photographic data, to respond to the potential that exists.

# 1

## Unlearning Imperialism

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### The Shutter: Well-Documented Objects / Undocumented People

It is no secret that millions of objects, never destined for display in museal white walls, have been looted from all over the world by different imperial agents. It is no secret that many of them have been carefully handled, preserved, and displayed to this day in Western museums as precious art objects. At the same time, it is no secret that millions of people, stripped bare of most of their material world, including tools, ornaments, and other artifacts, continue to seek a place where they can be at home again and rebuild a habitable world. These two seemingly unrelated movements of forced migration of people and artifacts, as well as their separation, are as old as the invention of the “new world.” People and artifacts have become objects of observation and study, conversion and care, charge and control by two seemingly unrelated sets of disciplines, institutions, and their scholars and experts. In truth, however, neither the movements nor their separation are unrelated. With a certain endlessly recurring brevity, similar to that of the operation of a camera shutter, the unending instantiation of their separation is reiterated. They are continuously produced as disconnected, as if it were the nature of artifacts to exist outside of their communities, to come into being as museum objects, to be out of reach of those who

felt at home in their midst—as if it were the nature of certain people to exist bereft of the worldly objects among which their inherited knowledge and rights, protective social fabric and safety, bliss and happiness, sorrow and death are inscribed—as if these objects were not a source of worldliness and a fountain of liveliness for the communities from which they were taken.

Think of the camera shutter. It is a commonplace in the discourse of photography that an operating shutter is necessary for obtaining a legible, sharp, and precise image out of the flow of light. Understood as a subservient element of the photographic apparatus, a means toward an end, the shutter is discussed mainly in technical terms related to the rapidity of its closure, the ability to control and change its velocity, and the swiftness of its performance. The picture to be obtained is presumed to exist, even if for a brief moment, as a petty sovereign. The petty sovereign is not what is recorded in the photograph (in terms of its final content or image) but, rather, is the stand-alone photograph-to-be, the image that prefigures and conditions the closing and opening of a shutter. The petty sovereign asserts itself at that moment as preceding and separate from the photographic event, from the participants, and from the situation out of which a photograph is about to be extracted. It commands what sort of things have to be distanced, bracketed, removed, forgotten, suppressed, ignored, overcome, and made irrelevant for the shutter of the camera to function, as well as for a photograph to be taken and its meaning accepted. What is suppressed and made irrelevant is excised by the shutter. In the technological and historical discussion of the shutter, the only elements that matter are the quality—precision, clarity, recognizability—of the images, the end product, and the erasure of any trace of the shutter's operation. This is an effect on the one hand of the means–ends relationship between the camera and the images it produces and on the other hand, the dissociation of the camera's shutter from other imperial shutters. The shutter is a synecdoche for the operation of the imperial enterprise altogether, on which the invention of photography, as well as other technological media, was modeled.

Imagine that the origins of photography are not to be found somewhere around the beginning of the nineteenth century—when European white males enjoyed a certain cultural, political, and technological wealth and could dream of recognition as glamorous inventors if and when they succeeded in developing further ways to fragment,



dissect, and exploit others' worlds to enrich their own culture. Imagine instead that those origins go back to 1492. What could this mean?

To answer this question we have to unlearn the expert knowledge that calls upon us to account for photography as having its own origins, histories, practices, or futures and to explore it as part of the imperial world in which it emerged. We have to unlearn its seemingly obvious ties to previous and future modes of producing images and to problematize these ties that reduce photography to its products, its products to their visibility, and its scholars to specialists of images oblivious to the constitutive role of imperialism's major mechanism—the shutter. Unlearning photography as a field apart means first and foremost foregrounding the regime of imperial rights that made its emergence possible.

Let me present briefly an excerpt from the well-known report by Dominique François Arago, which was delivered in 1839 before the *Chambre des Deputies* and is considered a foundational moment in the discourse of photography. The speech is often quoted as an early attempt to define and advocate the practice and technology of photography. I propose to read it as a performance of the naturalization of the imperial premise out of which photography emerged. That Arago, a statesman and a man of his time, confirms the imperial premises of photography and praises its goals is no surprise. What is striking is how his ideas are reiterated in non-statesmen's texts, including works that rejected the imperial order and goals, such as Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Such reiteration is testament to the way photography was rooted in imperial formations of power: first and foremost the use of violence, the exercise of imperial rights, and the creation and destruction of shared worlds.

Dominique François Arago:

While these pictures are exhibited to you, everyone will imagine the extraordinary advantages which could have been derived from so exact and rapid means of reproduction during the expedition to Egypt; everybody will realize that had we had photography in 1798 we would possess today faithful pictorial records of that which the learned world is forever deprived of by the greed of the Arabs and the vandalism of certain travelers. To copy the millions of hieroglyphics which cover even the exterior of the great monuments of Thebes, Memphis, Karnak, and others would require decades of time and

legions of draughtsmen. By daguerreotype one person would suffice to accomplish this immense work successfully.<sup>1</sup>

Walter Benjamin:

Around 1900, technological reproduction not only had reached a standard that permitted it to reproduce all known works of art, profoundly modifying their effect, but it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes. In gauging this standard, we would do well to study the impact which its two different manifestations—the reproduction of artworks and the art of film—are having on art in its traditional form.<sup>2</sup>

Both Arago and Benjamin assumed that images and objects—items that were not meant to be works of art or part of an imperially imagined depository of art history—are waiting to be reproduced. Reproduction is understood in this context as a neutral procedure to be used by those who own the proper means for it, and regardless of the will of those from whom the objects have been expropriated. It is based on this understanding of reproduction that photography could be perceived as a new technology of image production and reproduction. A lineage of previous practices of image production and reproduction should have been invented for photography to be conceived of as a novel addition, a technology that alters and improves—substantially and on different levels—the quality of the end product. In this means–end relationship, not only is photography construed as a means for the achievement of an end, but the end is also construed as a given, and the existence of the object as simply given to the gaze (of the camera, in this case) is thus assumed and confirmed.

The context of Arago’s speech enables one to reconstruct the regime of rights and privileges that were involved in the advocacy of photography. That the world is made to be exhibited, that it is only for a select audience, is not a question for Arago, addressed in his speech by the familiarizing “you” to an audience made up of white men like him,

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1 Dominique François Arago, “Report,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg, Stony Creek, CT: Leete’s Island Books, 1980, 17.

2 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3: 1935–1938, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, 21.

French statesmen and scientists. The right to dissect and study people's worlds—the Napoleonic expeditions are a paradigmatic example—and render their fragments into pieces to be meticulously copied is taken for granted. For that to happen, those who are harmed by the use of the new means of reproduction, which (to take one example) had been imposed and used systematically by Napoleon's brigade of draughtsmen during the expedition to Egypt should be bracketed and left outside of these debates in which the fate of photography is discussed, and the rights to operate it are directly and indirectly accorded to a certain class, at the expense of others.

In 1839, those who were directly invoked by Arago's "you" had already been responsible for large-scale disasters that included genocides, sociocides, and culturcides in Africa, India, the Americas and the Caribbean Islands, for naturalizing and legalizing these acts through international institutions and laws and for instituting their right to continue to dominate others' worlds. At that point, the universal addressee implied by Arago's "everybody" and "everyone" is fictitious because those who were its universal addressees could not come into being without dissecting, bracketing, and sanctioning others' experience of violence. The violence of forcing everything to be shown and exhibited to the gaze is denied when the right in question is only the right to see. If the right not to exhibit everything is respected, the right to see that endows "everybody" with unlimited access to what is in the world cannot be founded. Thus, extending the right to see so as to render "everybody" a true universal is not possible without perpetrating further violence. The idea of a universal right to see is a fraud. When photography emerged, it didn't halt this process of plunder that made others and others' worlds available to some, but rather accelerated it and provided further opportunities to pursue it. In this way the camera shutter developed as an imperial technology.

In a split second, the camera's shutter draws three dividing lines: in time (between a before and an after), in space (between who/what is in front of the camera and who/what is behind it), and in the body politic (between those who possess and operate such devices and appropriate and accumulate their product and those whose countenance, resources, or labor are extracted). The work of the shutter is not an isolated operation, nor is it restricted only to photography. If shutters in the service of petty sovereigns were limited only to cameras and were not operative in other domains—wherein the violence

perpetrated by the sharp movement of their blades hits bodies at a greater proximity—the departure of the camera and the photographer from the scene would not necessarily be part of a devastating regime. “Here we’re going to take your photograph”: this is what women whose children were snatched from them have been told after being arrested at the United States–Mexico border. When the automatic movement of the shutter completed its cycle, at one and the same time launching the event of photography and determining its completion, the women were taken to a different room from their children. Saying goodbye, hugging them, protecting them was no longer allowed, a set of limitations without any definite end.<sup>3</sup>

It is not the first time that their worlds were depleted and divided into pieces, that they were approached as if they were the image that a camera can take out of them, as if they were what they were forced to be. The pervasiveness of imperial shutters blurs direct responsibility. A woman can be made objectless, undocumented, an irresponsible mother, or a delinquent inhabitant by a shutter. Each new status forced upon people and objects by a shutter is likely to be reaffirmed by the next photograph. In such a world, one can no longer hear the cries of those who were separated from others and claim not to be what they are doomed to be by the shutter. For those doomed not to be heard, there is little way out of these coordinated technologies and institutions; their cries can be treated only as coming after, from the outside, or from an unruly position to be tamed. The mothers seek redress, but it is after the fact of dispossession. Consequently, the operation of the shutter commands zero degrees of neutrality, because whatever comes from its operation is already stripped bare of its singularity, its singular way of being part of the world.

Thinking about imperial violence in terms of a camera shutter means grasping its particular brevity and the spectrum of its rapidity. It means understanding how this brief operation can transform an individual rooted in her life-world into a refugee, a looted object into a work of art, a whole shared world into a thing of the past, and the past itself into a separate time zone, a tense that lies apart from both present and future.

The camera’s shutter is not a metaphor for the operation of imperial

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<sup>3</sup> See Sandi Doughton, “Rep. Jayapal Meets 174 Asylum-Seeking Women, Many of Them Separated from Their Children, at SeaTac Prison,” *Seattle Times*, June 9, 2018.

power, but it is a later materialization of an imperial technology. Photography developed with imperialism; the camera made visible and acceptable imperial world destruction and legitimated the world's reconstruction on empire's terms.

Unlearning imperialism aims at unlearning its origins, found in the repetitive moments of the operation of imperial shutters. Unlearning imperialism refuses the stories the shutter tells. Such unlearning can be pursued only if the shutter's neutrality is acknowledged as an exercise of violence; in this way, unlearning imperialism becomes a commitment to reversing the shutter's work. This reversal must overcome the dissociation between people and objects in which the experts specialize. Imperial shutters are operated and controlled by experts of different sorts who are mandated to determine how the commons is to be exploited, what could be extracted out of it and under which circumstances. The photographic shutter contributes to the reproduction of imperial divisions and imperial rights and is used as lasting proof that what was plundered is a *fait accompli*.

One ought to imagine that at the moment the shutter closes in order to reopen again in a fraction of a second—to proclaim a new state, a new border, or a new museum—the people whose lives are forever going to be changed by the act are rebelling and do not let the shutter sanction such acts as *faits accomplis*. One may also imagine that those who have been dispossessed manage to recover some of the objects robbed from them or burn the papers that granted their possessions to others. This is not what one has to work hard to imagine; this happens anyway. Rather, it needs to be recognized and acknowledged as an intrinsic part of the shutter's operation. There is always withdrawal or refusal.

Imagine now that you are able to consider all of these occurrences as constitutive of the operation of the shutter; imagine, then, that when you recognize the operation of the shutter independently of such occurrences, you risk effecting their disappearance. Imagine you can grasp and describe this shutter's operation, follow the events that it violently generates, and do so without using the shutter's dividing lines to describe them. Imagine that you refuse to naturalize the dividing lines and do not accept them as having always already been there. Imagine that the presumed factuality of the sentence "a Mexican migrant was killed while crossing the American border" becomes impossible because one sees through imperial shutters and recognizes

that a Mexican cannot cross illegally a foreign border erected illegally on her own land. Recalling this fact (which runs against common propaganda), one now understands that if the woman is killed it is because a foreign border has been erected against her in a way that transforms her murder into an affirmation of her own guilt and illegality.

This is what unlearning imperialism looks like. It means unlearning the dissociation that unleashed an unstoppable movement of (forced) migration of objects and people in different circuits and the destruction of the worlds of which they were part. These worlds were transformed into a construction site where everything could be made into raw material. Under imperial rule there is no longer a common world to care for but only scattered enclaves to protect. Unlearning imperialism is an attempt to suspend the operation of the shutter and resist its operation in time, space, and the body politic in common cause with those who object to it. Unlearning imperialism attends to the conceptual origins of imperial violence, the violence that presumes people and worlds as raw material, as always already imperial resources.

What does it take to attend to the recurrent moment of original violence? It involves rehearsals of avoidance, abstention, nonaction, stepping back, and losing ground. One should learn how to withhold alternative interpretations, narratives, or histories to imperial data, how to refrain from relating to them as given objects from the position of a knowing subject. One should reject the rhythm of the shutter that generates endless separations and infinitely missed encounters, seemingly already and completely over. One should unlearn the authority of the shutter to define a chronological order (what and who came first, who was late to arrive) and the organization of social space (what is included and what is not, who can inhabit which position and engage in which role). One should engage with others, with people and objects across the shutter's divides, as part of an encounter to be simultaneously resumed, regenerated, retrieved, and reinvented.

To attend is to seek different transformative modes of repair of which restitution and reparations are possible options. When heads of some European states speak publicly about possible restitution of looted works of art, they act as if the click of the imperial shutter is no longer audible and the destruction of entire worlds can be reduced to discrete objects. The language of restitution that focuses on discrete objects and assumes their sameness after decades of confinement in

foreign hands is oblivious to the communities that were destroyed at the moment of their extraction and oblivious to the mutilation of the objects severed from their worlds. Restitution implemented unilaterally as a magic solution risks substituting a substantial accountability and closure to violence with what Glenn Coulthard describes as a settler-colonial form of reconciliation that allocates “the abuses of settler colonization to the dustbins of history.”<sup>4</sup> Restitution may be the right thing to follow in particular cases as defined by the claiming communities, but it should be questioned as a solution, as long as the problem that restitution means to solve remains defined through the same shutter that generated it, leaving untouched the imperial violence of the camera’s first clicks.

In a complaint filed on March 20, 2019, against Harvard University and the Peabody Museum, Tamara Lanier inhabits the position of her ancestor, Renty Taylor, whose image was “seized” in the formative first decade of photography, thus attending to the origins of photography and reclaiming a series of expropriated rights. The complaint’s use of the term “seizure” to describe the act of taking a photograph emphasizes the violence involved but also undermines the legal and cultural consequences of the separation between taking the photograph and holding the photograph as property. This separation enables holders of photographs extracted under conditions of violence to continue to claim ownership of the image—in this case the daguerreotype—as if the violence belonged to a different time that cannot impact contemporary property rights. Though the restitution of the daguerreotype is central to Lanier’s complaint, the restitution she claims is infinitely more radical. It is the restitution of the right to participate differently, not only in the discrete event in which the image was seized, but in the shaping of what photography will become after 1850, a participation that was denied to Renty Taylor and to African Americans in general. Though photography didn’t play a major role in enslavement, it can play a major role in its abolition, premised on repair and reparations.

It is therefore essential to undo the operation of the shutter in space, time, and the body politic, the three dimensions through which imperial violence operates. The dividing lines traced and retraced in any one of these dimensions always already confirm the dividing lines

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4 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 108.

traced and retraced in the two others. Everything is done to make sure that those affected by the shutter will no longer be able to come together with the others the shutter has confined to other spaces and well-differentiated categories. To refuse the shutter is to begin to practice potential history.

This book is the outcome of research conducted through a series of “rehearsals” in returning to the time imperial shutters clicked open and closed, in joining strikes and imagining possible strikes across archives involving old and new alliances between professional and nonprofessional users of cameras and archives, shareholders of their accumulated wealth. Unlearning imperialism involves different types of “*de-*,” such as decompressing and decoding; “*re-*,” such as reversing and rewinding; and “*un-*,” such as unlearning and undoing. These particular practices pertain not only to the products of shutters—images, faits accomplis, facts, legal statuses, and museum objects—but to the division of rights that these products naturalize. In effect, the non-imperial actions, memories, and potentialities that such normalized configurations threaten to shut off become—in the practice of potential history—legible, perceptible, and redistributed.

These rehearsals do not seek to make legible *again* but *from ever*—*from* an indefinite past rather than toward (or in anticipation of) indefinite futures, as in *for ever*—not as retrieved histories but as an active mechanism that seeks to maintain the principle of reversibility of what should have not been possible, a refusal of imperial shutters closing in the first place. Potential history does not mend worlds after violence but rewinds to the moment before the violence occurred and sets off from there. This can hardly be imagined without rehearsals, since our daily habits are so entangled in the operation of imperial technologies. Such rehearsals in nonimperial political thinking and archival practice are not undertaken in preparation for an imminent day of reckoning, but rather as a mode of being with others differently.

Unlearning imperialism’s original violence is aspiring to attend to the moment when the shutter is about to automatically reopen, as though that which *should not* have been possible *could not ever* have been possible. Unlearning imperialism means aspiring to be there for and with others targeted by imperial violence, in such a way that nothing about the operation of the shutter can ever again appear neutral, independent of its outcome, disconnected from those who



operate it, or separated from its complicity at the moment it completes its mechanism. Unlearning imperialism is unlearning the processes of destruction that became possible: the knowledge, norms, procedures, and routines through which worlds are destroyed in order for people to become citizens of a differentially ruled body politic. Unlearning the differential principle is necessary to connect what imperialism fundamentally separates, that is, to bridge the normalized split between “others” dispossessed by imperialism and the materialization (in institutions and infra/structures) of the imperialist mechanism of splitting that indiscriminately possesses our world.

The aim is to articulate the connection between (what appear as) imperialism’s irreconcilable poles: on the one hand, those forced to live in the most physically destroyed parts of our shared world, to accept secondary and subservient roles, to provide services and resources (including themselves as resources) for the maintenance of white grandeur, and to accept a version of citizenship founded on and perpetuated by white grandeur—and, on the other hand, the materialization of this very split in democratic institutions, structures, and infrastructures. Unlearning becomes a process of disengaging from the unquestioning use of political concepts—institutions such as *citizen*, *archive*, *art*, *sovereignty*, and *human rights*, as well as categories like the *new* and the *neutral*, all of which fuel the intrinsic imperial drive to “progress,” which conditions the way world history is organized, archived, articulated, and represented.

Unlearning is essential in order to emphasize the degree of our implication in institutionalized imperial violence through different facets of “good” liberal citizenship designed to protect the differential principle on which citizenship is predicated: conceiving of art and museums as signs of progress, caring for the preservation of the past by saving documents, rescuing endangered cultures, feeling compassion for and expressing solidarity with people living in poverty as though they are dwellers of other planets, supporting reform initiatives for the victims of the regimes under which citizens are ruled, and endorsing progressive social projects aimed at “improving lives” in other places by enabling their inhabitants to benefit from seemingly advanced and transparent institutions for managing populations, debts, and cultural traditions. Unlearning is a way to reverse the role of the normalized milestones that structure the phenomenological field out of which modern history is still conceived and narrated, such as those of

progress and democratization in the place of (for example) destruction, appropriation, and deprivation, followed (as if in later phases) by the imperial “generosity” of providing for those dispossessed by imperialist policies.

Unlearning involves understanding that what was taken by the unstoppable imperial movement, and held as if naturally owned by Western institutions, cannot be parsimoniously redistributed through charity, educational uplift, or humanitarian relief. The idea that plundered labor and wealth should be acknowledged and restored is neither a progressive idea nor the “most advanced phase” of “our democracies,” so much so that centuries were supposedly required in order to reach such a point. Not willing to have one’s culture destroyed, resisting such attempts, inventing modes of gaining back some of what was stolen, and asking for reparations cannot be projected on a linear temporal axis and described as evolving along time. Potential history assumes it as part of the ontology of imperial plunder, thus unlearning its “progressive” temporality. There is no imperial plunder without its own failures to fully achieve its goals, as well as more or less pronounced attempts made to stand in its way, to oppose it, to stop it, to undermine its power, to conceal or protect what it seeks to appropriate. When imperial actions are understood as recurring alongside the unceasing struggle against them, then imperialism’s histories cannot be narrated as evolving along time. A revision of some ontological premises is required. Questions such as what constitutes imperialism, slavery, citizenship, or the archive cannot be answered through the reiteration of their declared mission as it has been institutionalized.

Rehearsals in nonimperial thinking are necessary in order to ask how this unstoppable movement storms through citizens, inciting them to act as agents of progress as it seeks to destroy what is cherished by them (or what should have been cherished if they were not already born into second or third generations affected by imperial retentiveness), namely their worlds and modes of being with others, their very capacity to be with others, to act and interact in reciprocity and not through the roles they were assigned to facilitate destruction. This world-destroying capacity is constitutive of what I propose to call *imperial retentiveness*: the ability to retain the outcome of imperial violence as fact, as what is, what one is, and what one has. Unlike other types of retentiveness, this type cannot be countered with alternative data or memories, but rather with continuous processes of unlearning

through which the very structures can be undone that articulate violence as firm data and fixed memory. Unlearning imperialism means unlearning what one's ancestors inherited from their ancestors, and them from theirs, as solid facts and recognizable signposts, in order to attend to their origins and render imperial plunder impossible once again.

## Aïsha

More than a decade ago, when I started the research for this book, I could not anticipate that the nothingness that I know about the Algerian origin of my father would one day have a proper name. Some years ago, already deep into the writing of this book, I came to know this proper name—Aïsha—and adopted it, making it mine. This was the name of my father's mother, my grandmother, which he never passed down to us, his daughters and grandchildren. His mother's name at home was always "grandma," which as a child seemed to me a proper name. I discovered Aïsha as my grandmother's name only after my father's death, when I looked at his birth certificate. I was all too familiar with my father's overt and covert practices of passing for a French.<sup>5</sup> When I first interpreted his action in relation to us, his children and grandchildren, I ignored the meaning of his action in relation to his ancestors. It took me some time before I could recognize that it was more than just a name, that my grandmother insisted and my father gave up on adherence to a name that the whole family was encouraged not to carry when they had been invited to become French citizens, in other words, to give away part of their Arabness. By concealing this name from us, my father betrayed his ancestors. He acted like the male-patriotic Roman citizens in David's painting, *The Oath of the Oratii* (in which French revolutionaries would recognize themselves shortly after the 1784 painting was completed), turning his back to the family and siding with the patriotic colonizers who were busy destroying the family's precolonial world, a world that my grandmother's name still evokes.

By not letting the name go—by rejecting my father's legacy for the

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5 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, "Mother Tongue, Father Tongue, Following the Death of the Father, and the Death of the Mother," [sternthalbooks.com](http://sternthalbooks.com).

sake of renewing the precolonial legacy of the family—I am standing with my ancestors and not against them, trying to reverse my father’s readiness, once and again, to replace the wound of the colonized by converting into a “colonial monger” who turns against himself, his family, and his world. Even though his citizenship was revoked in 1941 and he was incarcerated in one of Vichy’s concentration camps, he still desired to be “one of them.”<sup>6</sup> I wished he had revolted against the breach in his existence forced by the colonizers that impaired his capacity to cherish and care for the world into which he was born, making him incapable of saying aloud his mother’s name and sharing it with his children. But I knew he could not do that. This would have required accepting his existence as an Algerian, the kind of man the colonizers despised, and an Arab Jew, the kind of existence and historical experience that the Zionists in his new “homeland” consistently denied. I do regret that I never had a name for his particular French accent and could never ask him about its origin. For, obviously, what I now recognize as a North African accent could not have been acquired without speaking—at least as a child and with his mother—Arabic.

My father clearly did not want this name to circulate and be associated with our family, to taint the semi-white appearance he worked hard to acquire. He was a clever and creative man who used inventive skills to survive the racialization of non-European Jews who immigrated to Palestine soon after the destruction of Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel. Arriving to Israel in 1949 from Paris, he did not miss the opportunity to pass for a French immigrant, rather than the dark-skinned Algerian Jew that he was. His “passing scheme” included us, his children, whom he had sought to whiten even before we were born, when he courted a light-skinned woman as our future mother.

But dealing with his mother’s name was different. He could not have played with or around this name. He must have hidden and denied it altogether. Aïsha, Aï-sha, Aïeeee-shaaaa, an expression of a sharp pain that erupts with the first syllable (aïeee) and is immediately silenced by the second one (“sha,” a common sound of hushing), as if to appease what could get out of control. He had succeeded in it

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6 See Susan Slyomovics, “French Restitution, German Compensation: Algerian Jews and Vichy’s Financial Legacy,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 17: 5, 2012, 881–901.

as long as he lived, but the secret was revealed soon after his death. I have experienced this discovery—the epiphany of an Arab name in the midst of a Jewish-Israeli and Hebrew-speaking family—as a treasure. I have celebrated the presence of this unruly name as an invaluable relic from a different pre-imperial world, which has inspired this book from the moment I discovered it. With it my anti-imperial commitment became one with a pre-imperial aspiration that existed prior to the moment when thousands of Algerian Jews were invited or forced to understand their Jewishness as irreconcilable with their Arab and Algerian existence and had to alienate themselves from the world they once shared with their Muslim neighbors.

Embracing Aïsha as my name is an attempt to hold on to the potential preserved in it, a potential that survived a long history, from before the Crémieux decree (1872) to the present form of Zionism and the Israeli state. It is an attempt to reverse the command to posit one's Jewish identity in absolute opposition to one's Arabness. For, after all, the Crémieux decree was a French imperial act, which did not simply grant citizenship to one distinct group of non-Muslim Algerians (as it is often described) but started the work, which the Zionists later sought to complete, to make Algerian Jews into such a group of non-Arab, semi-European, and second-grade French citizens. The decree was world-destroying, setting some groups apart from the general colonized population and against constitutive elements of their own identity. From my Aïsha's eyes, the imperial destruction of the commons in Palestine was exercised in a similar manner: a reiteration of a similar enterprise pursued a few decades earlier, westward along the southern Mediterranean shore.

## Unlearning the New, With Companions

Unlearning is what this book proposes and exercises in a series of rehearsals with others and also what shapes this book and the political ontology it articulates. Political ontology, as this book recovers it, is predicated on the rejection of imperial taxonomies that generate discrete beings defined by their discrete ontology. This rejection is effectuated—can be effectuated—only with companions who are not experts in delineated fields of knowledge and guardians of their delineated histories. Unlearning with companions involves questioning our

habits of studying the shared world through political concepts and categories, by exclusively perusing library shelves devoted to certain favored philosophers or seeking out the writings of statesmen drafted behind closed doors and later stored in imperial archives. Unlearning with companions means no longer privileging the accounts of imperial agents, scholars included, and instead retrieving other modalities of sharing the world and the many refusals inherent in people's public performances, diverse claims, and repressed aspirations.

Unlearning with companions is a withdrawal from the quest for the new that drives academic disciplines and an attempt to engage with modalities, formations, actions, and voices that were brutally relegated to "the past" and described as over, obsolete, or worthy of preservation but not of interaction and resuscitation. Unlearning means not engaging with those relegated to the "past" as "primary sources" but rather as potential companions. I sought out companions with whom entering (or not entering) the archive or the museum could be imagined and experienced as a form of cocitizenship, a partnership against imperial citizenship that dooms different people who share a world to not coincide in it ontologically or politically. Cocitizenship is not a goal for the future to come but a set of assumptions and practices shared by different people—including scholars—who oppose imperialism, colonialism, racial capitalism, and its institution of citizenship as a set of rights against and at the expense of others.

Cocitizenship is part of the ontological premise of this book, what makes it possible to reject the facticity of political figures like the "refugee," the "infiltrator," and the "collaborator" and to refuse to relate to them as objects of study, potential discoveries of "new" scholarship. I insist on a political ontology that allows them to coincide on the same ground, as cocitizens. Together, we could attend to the origins of their transforming into noncitizens (and of others into citizens) and unlearn the mechanisms that had deprived them of rights that others were to enjoy. A major thread of this process of unlearning with companions is *undiscovering*—how *not* to discover others' plight, even though much had been done to keep it off the radar of hegemonic powers. This is true of the rape of German women at the end of World War II (which I examine in chapter 3) as part of the implementation of a "new world order" and the suppression of competing political formations that could have emerged from a City of Ladies (*Cité des dames*). It is therefore necessary first to unlearn the researcher's tendency to

look at such moments with the expertise of a historian who is out to discover forgotten pieces of history, as if these actions and claims had ceased to compete with others and, instead, to keep alive the potential to reverse history.

Unlearning with companions from different places and times is also necessary in order not to forget that those policies we associate with recent times and call *neoliberalism* or *financial capitalism*—privatization, austerity, global free-trade treaties, financialization, or any other top-down notions adhering to an imperial timeline's major milestones—were mobilized in colonies and offshore territories much earlier and deployed against people whose lives were ruined while the fiction of Western progress, resting on the erasure of their histories, was established. Likewise, unlearning the divisions of time and space, and the differentiations within populations instituted by imperialism and reproduced through nation-states, is one way to resist conventional periodization, regional demarcations, and other classifications that have become operational as parts of various imperial formations (for example, the French Revolution, liberalism, neoliberalism, the war on terror, the end of World War II, the Cold War, economic crises, refugee crises).

Unlearning is a way of disengaging from political initiatives, concepts, or modes of thinking, including critical theory, that are devised and promoted as progressive and unprecedented. Instead, it insists that finding precedents—or at least assuming that precedents could be found—for resistance to racial and colonial crimes is not the novel work of academic discovery. Unlearning is a way of assuming that what seems catastrophic today to certain groups was already catastrophic for many other groups, groups that didn't wait for critical theory to come along to understand the contours of their dispossession and the urgency of resisting it and seeking reparation.

This is not the theory of the disciplinary study (explored in the next chapters) but rather the ontological premise of this book that is put forward, reconstructed, and elaborated throughout it. It is not proposed here as a "new" theory that improves or is built on previous theories, thus affirming that there is an outdated theoretical "past." On the contrary, it is a partnership with whoever acted in her life or enacted in her writings a nonimperial ontology, regardless of when the writer lived, because such ontology, by definition, cannot be new. The pursuit of the new defines imperialism.

The imperial movement of progress is pursued on the one hand as if along a single, straight line of advance, while on the other, it operates in a suicidal cycle where the new can hardly survive the constant and renewable threat of being declared unfit by the newest. The new is an imperial incentive, a requirement, and a command, but it is framed as an inspiration and a promise in ways that separate it from the violence it involves. Pursued for the sake of itself, it is above all a force, destructive and unstoppable. The new unfolds in a particular temporality—that of historical progress—without which nothing can be announced as new. The principle of the new has become the source of its own authority; the newness of the new has become its sole *raison d'être*, and—like colonial expansion and capitalist growth—it has become voracious and insatiable.

When anything new becomes a cherished token of progress, and possessing or having access to it becomes the modern mode of being *à la mode*, the movement of the new expands into ever more places where things can be made unfit, old, obsolete, and given over to people's obsession for modernizing them. The condition of imperial modernity is to be always in motion, always in the process of expanding the new into new territories, sometimes even against the laws of physics. From the very beginning, this principle of the new has been inseparable from the principle of destruction, a destruction that has taken many shapes and is often wrought, against their will, by those who are actually its direct targets and victims. After all, destruction cannot be pursued without laborers, just as imposing new structures cannot be built without workers. Progress is both the reason and excuse for destruction and its remedy, the preferable way to deal with the wreckage left behind while producing ever-increasing ruination. Destruction is done in the name of progress, a concept that today still holds the status of a supreme authority, sparing people the responsibility for their destructive actions and making them believe that their actions were guided by an authority higher than human interests. Nothing is supposed to stand in the way of progress; nothing is permitted to stay as it used to be. Piles of debris everywhere may be the most visible marks of the triumph of progress, but the destruction of a shared world—what people can and should care for together—is its less visible but no less worrying manifestation.

Modern citizenship (which I propose to qualify as imperial citizenship since it is predicated on a set of imperial rights at the expenses of



others) is not bounded by care for existing worlds but is rather motivated by the desire to craft new ones. Skills of destruction, packaged as vision, discovery, and innovation, are made into growing fields of expertise. The celebratory narratives of modern citizenship conceal its role in the destruction of worlds and their modes of caring and sharing, wherein those who were made noncitizens dwelled and were doomed to aspire to become citizens, that is, imperial citizens. Unlearning is a way to rewind the progressive history of imperial citizenship granted to people in stages along the “advancement in the civilizing process.”<sup>7</sup> Within this paradigm, Jews, women, and people of color, are considered living proof that there is progress in the world, having finally attained—or having been provided with—the status, though not the actual situation, of full citizens. What is offhandedly omitted from this narrative are the phases of world destruction, dispossession, deprivation, and subjugation that precede any prospective emancipation “offered” to those who have been given imperial citizenship. To rewind this history is to insist on the existence of different patterns and incommensurable modalities of citizenship experienced prior to colonization by different groups and peoples who shared their world as cocitizens of different sorts in the societies in which they lived. Such a movement is to embrace this incommensurability as a common ground upon which imperial citizenship cannot be assumed to embody the invariable model against which other modalities are evaluated.

Imperial citizenship needs a past. The role of institutions such as archives and museums in the “preservation” of the past is the effect of a vast enterprise of destruction conducted at the expense of and as a substitute for destroyed worlds. Fueled and justified by the pursuit of the new, what is destroyed is produced as past and elaborate procedures of salvage and preservation are devoted to extract and study cherished samples as proof of bygone times and their own progress. The “past” consists of discrete objects, documents, and relics detached from what were or could have been the sustainable worlds of which they were part, and whose destruction is often justified for the sake of their rescue. If what they preserve is extracted from living worlds, and if living worlds are producing objects whose destination is the

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7 See V. W. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, 11.

museum and archive, their study cannot be confined to what is in them but should include the role they play in this enterprise of world destruction—in the production of what Hannah Arendt calls worldlessness. *Worldlessness* is often used to describe the state of people who were left with no world to dwell in. Given that this plight was inflicted by some and suffered by others, in a world that they continued to share, I'll question the attribution of this term to the targeted population and will propose to append it with another term—*world-carelessness*—that emphasizes that active carelessness for the world is a constitutive element of imperial citizenship.

## A Nonprogressive Study

The imperial movement of progress did not hit all places at once, and what it brought about was not progress but rather the destructive movement itself, the unstoppable force whose expansion destroys, unstopably, because stopping it had become sacrilegious. The movement of progress, as Hannah Arendt argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is a mode of terror: “This movement, proceeding according to its own law, cannot in the long run be hindered; eventually its force will always prove more powerful than the most powerful forces engendered by the actions and the will of men.”<sup>8</sup> This unstoppable movement that traverses us is the movement that I aim to unlearn in this book, putting myself in the company of others.

Unlearning is a commitment to think against and prior to imperialism without forgetting, even for a moment, to what extent imperialism conditions us and invites us to act as its agents. It is acknowledging imperial violence as a given condition yet endeavoring to think before it. By seeking new modes of opposing imperialism, we risk acting as promoters of its progressive campaign for the new and relate to allies who preceded us as “not radical enough” in criticizing it, finding ourselves again as too few to withdraw from recognizing it as a condition. Unlearning imperialism is asking not how it could be opposed tomorrow but rather how was it opposed yesterday, and before yesterday, such that the fragmented many can stand together outside of the

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<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Orlando, FL: A Harvest Book, 1975, 466.

temporality of progress that shapes the violence inflicted upon them as a condition.

Unlearning is returning to the initial refusal of dispossession and the world out of which it emerged and bringing that moment into our present rather than looking for future, better anti-imperialisms. Scholarly critiques of imperialism's drive toward progress have, in this way, not altered the default temporal givens of imperial ontology. Reparative or transformative visions are habitually described in terms that connote going forward or "moving in advance," as indicated by the meaning of the Latin root *progressus*. As a principle, advancing implies a constant detachment from what must be made past, devalued, and destroyed in the hope of what is expected to come in the future. Potential history's assumption is that progress is not just an idea but more importantly a destructive force, a movement, a condition embedded in temporal and spatial structures that in the course of a few hundred years has shaped the way we relate to the common world and narrate our modes of being together. We must not pretend we need to progress past "progress"—that is the temporal problem imperialism has devised for us.

Attending to the origins of this movement is, as I will show, a way to suspend its conditioning principle. In his discussion of the "new physics of power," Michel Foucault postulates the origin of such an unstoppable movement—which he locates within the European context, ignoring its importance in the pursuit of European imperial projects around the world—in the invention of the panopticon in the eighteenth century. Here, Foucault makes a brief reference to progress but pays the concept surprisingly little attention. In addition to its widely discussed function as a technology of surveillance and subjectivization, the panopticon raises the question not of how to intervene in the movement of progress but of how to catalyze it: "how is power to be strengthened in such a way that, far from impeding progress, far from weighing upon it with its rules and regulations, it actually facilitates such progress?"<sup>9</sup> This fleeting mention of "progress" indicates that the panopticon does not merely emblemize "a new physics,"<sup>10</sup> a primary form of discipline from which other forms would evolve (as Deleuze suggests in his "Postscript on the Societies of

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9 Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage, 1979, 208.

10 Ibid. (italics added).

Control”<sup>11</sup>), but is also a contingent form in relation to the movement of progress. Foregrounding the contingency of the panopticon enables the study of other devices: for example, the slave ship as proposed by Simone Browne, as a way to render slavery constitutive of the enterprise of progress, predicated on an imaginary separation of Europe from its colonies.<sup>12</sup> If the explicit aim of the panopticon is to channel social forces into a productive economy (“to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education”),<sup>13</sup> its implicit function would be to enable progress, regardless of whether it operates in a prison, factory, or school.

If disciplinary sites and environments of enclosure emerged in the eighteenth century, as Foucault argues, and if at least part of their function was already to facilitate progress, it follows that progress as a recognized force should have preceded them significantly and should by then have been operating as a principle and a goal. Progress, as Foucault refers to it here, is not a philosophical idea but rather a force that by the eighteenth century was acknowledged as something that could not and should not be stopped. However, the operation of progress as an unstoppable movement began much earlier, with the accumulation of wealth that required unheard of speed, which in the pretechnological era was attained by forcing people to become “able bodies,” to be used for defined ends or the achievement of “new heights.” Slavery, thus, could be understood not as incidental to the regime of progress but constitutive of its movement, and hence what requires its reversal if slavery is to be truly abolished: “the British Empire needed to promote wealth accumulation *rapidly* and to new heights which were not possible with free or contracted labor.”<sup>14</sup>

## 1492: Marker of Reversibility

The pursuit of the *new* plays a crucial role in enabling imperial violence to be experienced and perceived as a given condition, irreversible.

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11 Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59, 1992, 3–7.

12 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters—On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Duke University Press: Durham, 2015.

13 Foucault, “Panopticism.”

14 Hilary McD. Beckles, *Britain’s Black Debt—Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide*, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2013, 20.

The *new* is not just a descriptive designation; rather, it wields force as an accelerator of violence, constitutive of its naturalization and essential to its power to continuously “discover” new worlds and areas of exploration, thus turned into a store of resources ready to be exploited. The question is not how to prove that the people who lived in the “new world” at the moment of its “discovery” by Europeans knew that their world was not “new.” The question is how to rupture, stop, and retroactively reverse the category of the “new” that seems to have survived intact, coeval with the real, and how to undo its facticity in and through research and scholarship. Potential history is an attempt to unlearn—with others and against all the shutters that affirm otherwise—1492 as history, as a distant point in a linear timeline from which things have followed as they should have. “I only have one conscience, which awakens my memories of 1492,” writes Houria Bouteldja. “Thanks to this memory,” she continues, “I know with the assurance of my faith and with the intense joy that ‘Native Americans’ were ‘the good guys.’”<sup>15</sup>

Relating to 1492 as part of her own memories is a way to affirm her own indigeneity and define the meaning of being Indigenous of the French Republic. This concept, Bouteldja writes, “refers to the category ‘Indigenous’ as deployed by republican France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to designate its colonial subjects.”<sup>16</sup> However, the descendants of the colonial subjects do not live in the conquered land—Algeria only—but also in France. As descendants of colonial subjects, they refuse to let the colonial state continue to define their indigeneity, and, consequently, their mode of inclusion in the Republic. “I am here because white people were in my country, because they are still there,” Bouteldja writes, as if responding to the colonial expectation that the colonized would disappear from the Republic.<sup>17</sup>

Remembering 1830, the conquest of Algeria, through the beginning of the invasion of the New World in 1492 is a way to unlearn an imperial epistemology predicated on reversing the relationship between invaders and invaded. Though Bouteldja doesn’t address this, prior to the invasion of Algeria in 1830, a significant number of

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15 Houria Bouteldja. *Whites, Jews, and Us—Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*, South Pasadena: Semiotext(e): 2017, 30.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

those who became Algeria's indigenous population—both Muslims and Jews—had been the undesired population, and in 1492 had been expelled from Spain and other places in Europe. Remembering 1492 together with 1830 is also a way to unlearn the imperial ontology predicated on separating the histories of people and objects precisely at the moment that these people and objects are forced to share one history. Here I use 1492 to refer not just to the New World but to the shared history of expulsion, separation, and colonization that began the long process of dispossession.

Soon after the first colonial invasion to unknown and distant lands, Europeans were encouraged, pushed, or forced to join other Europeans in the “new” world, to settle in, trade with, explore, and exploit these places and share them with other Europeans. These places were not theirs, nor had they been anyone else's before the Europeans' arrival, for the simple reason that they were places, worlds, rather than territories and they were not owned. The discoverers of this “new” world were not interested in what they found but in what they could create out of its resources, which they conceived as theirs, waiting to be seized and exploited.<sup>18</sup> The presence of others in this world who were opposed to the enterprise of the new was considered both an impasse and an opportunity: indigenous communities were often treated as obstacles to be removed, subjects to be converted, partners to be cheated, if not as resources to be used and abused. This in itself was not new. Humans have been used and abused in different ways since the dawn of history. What was different is that it has become a principle of rule, structures were shaped and implemented to make others and their worlds into objects of study and research, and exploitative scholarship was naturalized as part of their abuse, articulating and legitimizing political terms, structures, institutions, concepts, and laws commonly identified as modern.

Potential history's assumption is that this relentless movement, enamored of the new, started in the late fifteenth century and inaugurated the destruction of diverse worlds in order to create a brand new world, inaugurated the production of carelessness for people

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18 See Andrew Fitzmaurice, “Anticolonialism in Western Political Thought—The Colonial Origins of the Concept of Genocide,” in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. D. Moses, New York: Berghahn Books, 2014.

(and extra care for their expropriated objects) now seen as worldless and available for enslavement, exploitation, rape, dispossession. This is epitomized in the conjuncture of events in 1492, when the mass expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain performed a large-scale manufacture of a body politic and generated “abandoned” property that was confiscated in order to fund Columbus’s second journey to the “new world.”<sup>19</sup>

Acknowledging destruction as this movement’s recurrent and generative principle is necessary in order to avoid the trap of progress narratives—the only way to study this movement without being fully conditioned by it. Thus, I propose to study discrete, different, and unrelated events separated from each other by hundreds of years as instantiations of the same monotone movement of the imperial shutter: the destruction of the Taínos’s cultural and political formations in 1514; the destruction of the nonfeudal cocitizenship system of the Igabo people (prior to the multiple campaigns of destruction that started with the Portuguese as early as the fifteenth century); the destruction of Judeo-Arab culture in Spain, and later in Algeria with the Crémieux Decree in 1872 that declared the Jews French citizens against their fellow cocitizens; and the destruction of Palestinian cultural and political formations in 1948 and beyond.

Moreover, the destruction of cultures was not delimited to the non-European; once European imperial agents were mobilized to destroy cultures, their own was necessarily impacted and already in the process of being destroyed. The destruction of non-European cultures, which enriched Europe, also destroyed many diverse formations in Europe that could not and were not allowed to survive the command of “progress.” Here is one example, reconstructed with the grain, from a legal document discussed by Hilary Beckles, and another, reconstructed “against the grain” by Silvia Federici as constitutive of the propagation of imperialism. In pursuit of “criminal enrichment,” or the “branding of persons as chattel,” European countries had to introduce a “moral and legal break from any African or European tradition of labor,” that is, to let their traditions also be destroyed and supplanted by new ones that often undermined their ground.<sup>20</sup> This can be illustrated in the

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19 See David Raphael, ed., *The Expulsion: 1492 Chronicles*, 2d ed., Valley Village, CA: Carmi House Press, 1992.

20 Beckles, *Britain’s Black Debt*, 19.

Barbados Act of 1661, titled “An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes,” in which this break is formulated and justified in terms of the existing British legal system’s insufficiency: “there being in all the body of that Law no track to guide us where to walk nor any rule set us how to govern such Slaves.”<sup>21</sup>

Inseparable from the destruction of European legal formations that made slavery possible, Federici unlearns the European historical narrative of a smooth transition from feudalism to capitalism. Such a seamless narrative performs a second massacre of the hundreds of thousands of women who were persecuted as part of the purification of Europe from women’s structures of transmission of knowledge and know-how, under the campaign known as a “witch hunt.”<sup>22</sup> This double massacre doomed to oblivion the legacy of non- and pre-imperial competing political, cultural, and economic formations that could defeat feudalism, “threatened to shipwreck the emerging capitalist economy,” and thus materialize in its place. “In response to this crisis,” Federici writes, “the European ruling class launched a global offensive, laying the foundations of a capitalist world-system in the relentless attempt to appropriate new sources of wealth, expand its economic basis and bring new workers under its command.”<sup>23</sup>

When destruction is understood as a principle, unlearning it is not only siding with others who suffered from white grandeur more than others and advocating for *their* cause, it is also claiming and reclaiming pre-imperial and nondestructive modes of sharing the world, which were then also made inaccessible to descendants of white Europeans who could have claimed them as part of their own pre-imperial heritage. Wherever the imperial forces of progress hit, they imposed *new* political institutions and practices, through the destruction of ecological, economic, social, cultural, moral, and political norms and systems of knowledge and through the normalization not only of the newly imposed procedures, but of the need to constantly and infinitely invent more of the new to justify the destruction of what exists.

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21 “An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes” [Barbados Act], 1661, in Stanley Engerman, Seymour Drescher, and Robert Paquette, eds., *Slavery*, New York: Oxford Readers: 2001.

22 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, New York: Autonomedia, 2004, 164.

23 *Ibid.*, 62.



Since the first moments of colonial “discovery,” imperialism imposed the rule of the survival of the fittest onto the different worlds encountered and their internal organizations. From then on, the political formations that were tolerated and allowed to survive, both materially and in the imagination, were those that did not block the imperial movement of progress. However, committed to imperialism’s critique, the risk in overemphasizing its destructive power—as if imperialism already succeeded in annihilating everything that lay in its path—can be countered by questioning the lineage of thinkers we are invited to follow, along with the political theory they have left us. Imperial mechanisms are made to prove the rule of the survival of the fittest and advocate for it, and yet imperialism’s enterprises of destruction operate neither at one stroke nor at all places simultaneously. Nonimperial formations neither fully disappeared nor were ever made fully irretrievable. In this atmosphere of progress and the ever-renewed organization of knowledge and disciplinary divisions, not much attention is paid to the remnants of once viable and rich political formations. The destruction of diverse political formations is doubled with the draining of the political imagination to a degree that these never fully destroyed formations, which survived imperial onslaught, are understudied, as if incapable of informing, shaping, and impacting political theory.<sup>24</sup>

The consolidation of the imperial conception of borders—as drawn, ruled, and governed by states and made crossable only with state-provided documents—may serve here as example. The diverse forms of migration, modes of crossing territories, and practices of belonging have been accounted for in ethnographic studies, but they have not been approached as viable options with which imperial ontology could be theoretically and politically challenged. The study of protective objects such as African miniature masks is not conceived by political theorists as part of the lineage of sources with which rights could be conceptualized, studied, and challenged. Nor are memoirs, such as the one by Olaudah Equiano, read outside of the context of slave narratives or literature, though they can be a stunning source for retroactively diversifying political theory. Equiano’s is an inspiring record of a destroyed political life and of governing circles (“our subjection to the King of Benin was little more than

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24 See Robin Walker, *When We Ruled*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2011.

nominal”<sup>25</sup>) with which the worldless conception of citizenship or culture, materialized in standardized imperial institutions, could be resisted and replaced by other worldly forms of political imaginations, concepts, and models.

My point is not a complaint about omission of this or that text from the repertoire of discussed texts; it is rather about the way a political ontology qua plurality is replaced by the epistemology of accepted political terms. These are studied in accordance with the mission statements of the institutions in which they are materialized such as archives or borders. Unlearning with companions involves questioning these accepted terms and the assumptions that allowed them to become the transcendental condition for politics.

Let me briefly illustrate this. When a particular type of sovereignty—monarchical sovereignty—was challenged in the eighteenth century, there was more than one answer to the question of how political life could be imagined and shaped. However, one distinct form of sovereignty was imposed violently by imperial powers; it became standardized through treaties, charters, franchises, resolutions, authorizations. It won support in the form of material aid from international bodies made, as the institutional moniker of the United Nations indicates, in the form of similar sovereign unities that echo one another as if in a hall of mirrors, thus affirming that differential sovereignty (which I examine in chapter 5) is the sole acceptable model. This model was subsequently taken for granted as the goal of virtually all liberation movements fighting to free their people from foreign and colonial rule.

Having enough power to expel and enslave numerous groups and individuals and to force them to partake in exploitative enterprises is not enough to bring destruction to its full completion or to deny the constant potential of its reversibility. Wherever imperialism sought to act on a world as if it were raw material, imperial forces were also conditioned by this world, by its resistance and resilience.<sup>26</sup> The people whom colonists encountered and exploited were never reduced to what they were expected to become—worldless—but continued to

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25 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself, 1789* [facsimile edition, no publisher listed], xx.

26 See for example Hautey’s speech quoted in de Las Casas, 2003.

leave their imprint on the world that imperial forces “found.” Tempting as it may be for the subject who seeks to morally denounce imperial plunders and destruction, the amplification of imperial violence comes necessarily at the expense of a salient account of its victims’ worldliness, articulated in the plurality and variety of their modes of engagement with the world. Potential history, as can be reconstructed from Richard Wright, starts when two axes are combined: “We stole words from the grudging lips of the Lords of the Land, who did not want us to know too many of them or their meaning.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, accounts of art, archives, or architecture in Congo in the beginning of the twentieth century, or in Palestine in the late 1940s, should refrain from relating to them as completely looted or destroyed, and from reiterating the imperial judgments of experts who state that the “best samples” of non-Western material culture are already in the possession of Western institutions, and the rest of it is fake. After all, such well-entrenched traditions, from which Western museums enriched themselves, do not vanish into a limbo, as Carl Anthony wrote in relation to African traditions of building.<sup>28</sup>

I propose to shift the discussion of worldlessness from its association with the state of the enslaved or refugees (expellees) to the imperial enterprise and to study the ways that imperial practices, institutions, and legal, political, and cultural languages deny groups’ incessant engagement with the world as a way of racializing and thus depriving them of their share in different common worlds. In a continuation of Sadri Khiari’s argument about race as a social relation—“similarly to the way capital produces classes, patriarchy produces genders, the global European colonialism produces races”<sup>29</sup>—I propose to see in the regime of museums and archives, in charge of the administration of objects and access to them, a major force of racialization and hence world destruction.

It is with the help of different companions that I propose to pay attention to the vernaculars that convey efforts to survive within the *new* worlds that they were forced to inhabit. I propose to relate to these

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27 Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, New York: Basic Books, 2008, 40.

28 Carl Anthony, “The Big House and the Slave Quarters: African Contributions to the New World,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscape of North American Slavery*, eds. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010, 177–92.

29 Sadri Khiari, *Le contre-révolution colonial en France*, Paris: La Fabrique, 2009.

idioms as still open political claims and to let them transform scholarship from the language of discovery and reinvention to the language of continuance, renewal, and repair. Thus, for example, rather than studying looted sculptures from Congo, Syria, or Palestine as if their presence in the museum—ready for the gaze and scrutiny of the art historian—is given (and thereby accepting the “neutral” procedures of the discipline as the framework that defines these objects’ modes of existence), with my companions these sculptures are approached as if they still belonged to the communities from which they were expropriated. While these items, now on display mainly inside Western white museal cubes, are considered works of art, I relate to them as objects in which the rights of violated communities are inscribed. This is part of my argument that objects and documents are not what we have been socialized and trained to see: standalone artifacts whose inscribed content exists for experts to interpret. Rather, they constitute part of the material worlds out of which people’s rights are made manifest.

### The Human Condition—A Political Ontology

The establishment of Western museums on the idea of democratization—the promise to enable citizens to enjoy the common wealth—implies that citizens’ rights are anchored in objects deposited in public institutions. However, the inscription of privileged citizens’ rights (mainly white Western citizens) in institutions established with labor extracted from non-Western peoples whose rights were denied through them, even though their objects form a constitutive part of their wealth, is inseparable from the inscription of this violence in these objects. Given the fact that the violence used to inscribe privileged citizens’ rights is deployed through the extraction of the material wealth of others from whom the same rights are denied, the nature of rights inscribed in these objects and their entitlement cannot be determined with categories of ownership. These categories enabled the accumulation of differences between those from whom these objects were expropriated and from whom rights were denied, on the one hand, and those who used others’ craftsmanship for their statecraft. Citizen’s privileges depended on the near worldlessness of others.

*Potential History* continues Arendt's endeavor in *The Human Condition*, while taking up Audre Lorde's call not to use the master's tools, "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," and employing Sylvia Wynter's framework of the diverse human species that the master's framework—Man—occludes.<sup>30</sup> My assumption is that the human condition, consisting of a diversity of political species and necessarily diverse worlds, is at the same time the object of imperialism's assaults and the bedrock of resistance to imperialism. It is this tension and struggle that I assume and explore. Insofar as it is a foundation for resistance, I conceive the human condition as a historical condition, arising from and against unstoppable imperial movement. However, I also assume the existence of a certain human condition that, while historically shaped and geographically differentiated, has recurrent features. This double assumption is essential for envisaging differently an end to what continues to exist even after its declared end: "It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form—though not necessarily the cruelest—only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past."<sup>31</sup> An end to the half millennium of imperialism, though, should be sought for in another condition, not a new one that will be fabricated for that purpose but ones that didn't cease to exist and should be embraced and revalorized out of its ruins.

Similarly, I propose a shift from the temporal axis and its historical markers of "beginning," "end," or "post" as if these conditions were historically successive to a synchronic framework through which the contest and irreconcilability between human and imperial conditions is undeniable. Thus, rather than an "end" *to come* for the sake of a future vision, I conceive of the human condition as an undefeatable condition that does not need to be invented, but rather asks not to be ignored for the sake of future utopias. We do not require more grandiose motions forward, but rather need slowed-down spaces for repairing, providing reparations, and reviving precolonial patterns and arrangements ungoverned by Man.

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30 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider – Essays and Speeches*, New York: Crossing Press Feminist Series, 2007, 112; Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review*, 3: 3, 2003.

31 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 460.

Exploring several theaters of imperial violence, I show that what is being reproduced throughout these centuries is the distribution of subject positions such as citizens, subjects, the indigenous, non-citizens, slaves, illegal workers, infiltrators, and so on. Despite what actors who embody these positions see, create, say, or dream, even while opposing the evils of imperialism, their actions, interactions, and speculations remain bounded by its very condition. “Men,” Arendt writes, “are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than relating to the human condition as a stage that could be superseded by another state of affairs (such as “posthuman”) following a linear historical narrative, I propose to see in it a subsisting condition that cannot be eradicated—“the *conditio sine qua non* of all political life”<sup>33</sup>—and has not ceased to exist even though the imperial principle of human engineering targets it directly. Hence, conditioned as we are by a world shaped by imperialism, its violence is constantly moderated and its status as a condition is challenged by the very condition it seeks to supersede.

To unlearn the conquest or defeat of the human condition that can neither progress nor be abolished, since it is the condition under which human life is given and renewed, is to expose linear temporality—the movement that calls for ultimate ends and new beginnings to be declared, as if with the wave of a wand everything could be brought to an end and replaced by the new—as the substance through which imperial politics is pursued as an engineering enterprise. Alarmed by Arendt’s description of the unstoppable imperial movement “cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature,” and her warning that a time has come in which man is technologically capable of abandoning human existence “as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere” and exchanging it for “something he has made himself,” potential history interprets the diverse human activities pursued according to different spatial and temporal modalities as the refusal of the many to accept such a bargain: “There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange,” Arendt writes, “just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all

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32 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, 9.

33 *Ibid.*, 7.

organic life on earth.”<sup>34</sup> It is this approach of stepping back, slowing down, and joining those who insist, successfully or not, on saying “no, thank you” to what is offered as promising, but which in fact departs from and transmutes the human condition. I practice this approach throughout this book.

Though the unstoppable movement seeks to forcefully relegate them to the past, these modes of life have never completely disappeared, and it is against their persistence as competing options in the present that constituent violence is relentlessly exercised, attempting every time to impose its outcome as the transcendental condition of politics, of art, of human rights. The constituent violence through which other forms of political life are destroyed is not a singular event, as Walter Benjamin argued in his critique of violence, but a mechanism that is continually reasserted in its next iteration in a way that collapses Benjamin’s distinction between the first constitutive violence and the law-preserving violence.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the perseverance of the human condition compels imperial institutions, practices, and concepts to cease to appear as the transcendental condition of politics, but rather as inseparable from the violence of its imposition.

Arendt anchors the human condition in labor, work, and action. It is not any one of these modes that is of a *longue durée* but rather their differentiation and the movement between them that makes it possible to imagine and reconstruct, even from amid the most atrocious and exploitative political regimes, such as chattel slavery or concentration camps, the possibility of the human species acting together not in the pursuit of any end, but using their skills, knowledge, and engagement with each other in building worlds, caring for them, and laboring to provide for their own needs and those of others. This differentiation, and not the three particular forms of activity that Arendt identifies, is essential in the quest to recover the human condition that opposes the imperial one and that undermines the conceptual foundations of imperialism, heretofore used without qualification. For human activities are not all the same: they do not all respond to the same needs and forms of exchange; they cannot all be recruited in the same way nor accumulated for the pursuit of certain enterprises (let alone imperial

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34 Ibid., 2–3.

35 Walter Benjamin, “Critic of Violence,” in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1: 1913–1926*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.

ones); and they are not all productive (and when they are, their products are of different types). Prior to imperialism, the human condition came under pressure from various political formations, but never with the same intensity, and never in the context of an organized global project whose goal was to destroy it and to replace both it and its world with totally different conditions, as imperialism and racial capitalism have done since the fifteenth century.

## The Differential Principle

The socialization of people into agents of large-scale crimes in and through the “new world” was made possible by the latter’s transformation into Europe’s offshore outposts. Consequently, regions doomed to be exploited by foreigners or outsiders, even within the mainland territory, were treated as if they were separate and external outposts. Whether in Europe, across the Atlantic, or elsewhere, these territories were forced to provide natural resources and human labor, based on the subjugation of “women’s reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force.”<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Europe and its outposts are irreducible to geography. The colonial exploitation of outposts was not separated from the politics that prevailed in Europe but was pursued as an extension of it; after all, the explorers, settlers, and governors often lived here and there, and their privileges as compared with those of colonized people, as well as their deprivations in relation to those of elites in the mainland, were part of what kept the mainland and its outposts united as a single political system riven by difference and antagonism. Those explorers and citizens, experts, and merchants acted as if they were free from the political norms of the mainland, thus supporting the illusion that in the mainland the political norms were moral. This duplicity, emblemized by the offshore outpost, was indispensable for the differentiations between types of governed populations and was at the same time exercised through those very differentiations, while developing, promoting, and installing a neutral language of an inclusive and universal politics. This language became the political lingua franca, which, in the course of a few centuries, deprived diverse political communities of the authority to pursue

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<sup>36</sup> Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 12.



and define their own practices and rules. It forced out many political idioms outside the official institutions and academic disciplines, preventing them from being spoken in places where people assembled in order to collaborate and act together, *with* and not only *against* others.

The outpost status of the new world entailed more than territorial distance. With the “new world,” a political principle of differentiality was invented. People started to be governed differentially from others, by other people whose rights were inscribed in worlds that the governed were forced to build and within which they were denied the right to feel at home. When imperial actors granted themselves citizenship, they continued to protect their privileges and inscribe their accumulation in different objects, institutions, and practices, thus multiplying the number of groups governed differentially. In between Europe and its offshore outposts, a new template for political regimes emerged early on—one based on a differential body politic. The need to preserve the principle outlasted any attempt to alter its local manifestations and to change here and there the status of small groups within populations or individuals among them. Thus, for example, in 1801, without alluding to the serious threat that could finally bring the system of slavery to its end, John Poyer, the white Barbadian historian, emphasized the need to preserve the differentiation on which every “well constituted society” is built:

Without this [state of subordination] no political Union could long subsist. To maintain this fundamental principle, it becomes absolutely necessary to preserve the distinctions, which naturally exist or are accidentally introduced into the Community. With us, two grand distinctions result from the state of Society: First, between the White inhabitants and the free people of Color, and secondly, between Masters and Slaves.<sup>37</sup>

The nature of these distinctions in specific contexts is secondary to the imperative to reproduce the principle itself. The offshore territory, distant from the European mainland, enabled the majority of the people living in the mainland not to associate themselves with forms of brutal violence such as enslavement, rape, massacres, genocides,

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<sup>37</sup> Beckles, *Britain's Black Debt*, 64.

and dispossession, even when they directly benefited from them. The mainland's discipline should not be studied separately from the making of subservient bodies in the colonies.

Violence of this kind and scale may be condemned and denounced in one context, and yet appear acceptable and completely separate from the form of political rule at home, unrecognized as the constituent principle of the regime that encompasses both populations and territories within a single sovereign unity. A major feature of differential rule is that such violence is also differentially perceived by the governed of a political unity, depending on the political status attributed to those who are exposed to it. This principle of differential rule has not only persisted but has become the foundational principle of every political regime from then on. Since the invention of the New World, this principle has led to the creation of some 200 nation-states, all of them based on a series of separations and differentiations enabling them to institutionally and legally distance themselves from crimes for which they refuse to be held accountable. These are not sporadic and discrete crimes, but what I call *regime-made disasters*, pursued locally through the operation of imperial shutters.

The camp as a form, foregrounded by different scholars as a key formation of imperialism, often overshadows the spatial principle on which it is premised. The attention that the camp attracted immediately after World War II (and has received again recently), together with its dissociation from sovereign unities, has reinforced the reductive identification of differential rule with oppressed groups incarcerated in such quarantined zones, while often leaving under- or un-studied the privileged groups that are invested in the creation and maintenance of offshore unities—citizens of those political regimes with whom the expropriated populations are governed—and that comprised part of the same polity, as if outposts such as camps were indeed located outside sovereign units that generated them. The fact that with the thrust of the imperial shutter, millions of people are produced as “stateless”—the embodiment of an internationally recognized political category, even though these people often continue to live somewhere within the borders of a nation-state—is paradigmatic of the power of the shutter to shape the territorial imagination of democratic politics.

The structure of the differential body politic is often reinforced by scholarly work, human rights discourse, and NGO activity, especially

in their focus on dispossessed and oppressed groups. Unlearning the effects of differential rule means accounting for its abusiveness to the entire body politic, including citizens who constitute the privileged groups among whom expropriated and oppressed groups live. When research focuses mainly on the most oppressed groups, I argue, it contributes to the socialization of citizens to act as privileged subjects who can afford to care about what is done to others, thus reproducing the radical difference between them, rather than as cocitizens who care for the common world they share with those others and are committed to dismantling the principle of differentiability that organizes it. When ruling is differential, citizenship is a privilege and a light weapon against all other groups of the governed population, whose differential inclusion is reaffirmed whenever citizens succeed in their struggles to increase their share and access to what Bonnie Honig calls the “public thing.”<sup>38</sup> Members of the privileged class may be concerned about oppressed groups and even express solidarity with them, but they are prompted to shape such concern and solidarity as a humanitarian care for the lives and fates of the oppressed, and not as an objection to and rejection of the political regime under which they, too, are governed. Acts of solidarity, humanitarian assistance, and protest against abuse and the dispossession of others tend to fall short of a struggle against the principle of differential rule, if there is no claim to radically reconsider the structure and meaning of citizenship and no call to dismantle the major principles underlying a differential political regime.

It is obvious that citizenship is the modality through which citizens perform their role as political subjects entitled to certain rights. Less evident is the way citizenship integrates these subjects and rights into a regime founded on the differential principle. It requires the institutionalization of violence, coercion, discipline, indoctrination, specialized fields of knowledge, investment in preservation of the past, promoting destruction for the sake of the new, human engineering, and a molding of the phenomenal field to make this integration happen and permit it to last, unrecognized, for generations.

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38 Bonnie Honig, “The President’s House Is Empty,” *Boston Review*, January 19, 2017, [bostonreview.net](http://bostonreview.net).

## Learning to Rewind

I became aware of the need to approach this research as a process of unlearning in a more acute way a few years ago when I started to study revolutions. I noticed four related incongruences, realities not aligned with concepts currently used to account for them. Unlearning is a way to foreground such incongruences and use them to reconfigure key political concepts that continue to provide us with imperial timelines, geographies, and political formations even when we are aiming toward non-imperial formations. The first is the incongruence between the eighteenth-century concept of citizenship and the prestige afforded its unprecedented political persona despite the tremendous losses people suffered with its advent. If one contested the value of the citizenship achieved through the American and French revolutions, one risked being misunderstood as, at best, a conservative echoing doctrines from Edmund Burke's school, an accusation that assumes that Burke's critique of the French Revolution should be altogether rejected.

The second incongruence appears through the disproportionate attention focused on imperial revolutions such as the American and French, acknowledged as *epochal turning points* in political life and political thinking, compared with the much less widely discussed anti-imperial Haitian Revolution and numerous other moments when people publicly performed their aspirations for freedom and revolted against those responsible for the conditions under which they lived. The existing vocabulary tampered with my efforts—and not only mine, as I recognized the same pattern in others' writings as well—to account for these activities according to what they already were, rather than what they aspired to be. Consider the hierarchy among nouns describing what people are doing when they are acting to change their life conditions (revolution > revolt > insurrection > riot) or the deficiency of verbs to describe these actions outside of the terms of sovereign law. (*Riot*, for example, is tagged as violence by the same apparatuses that define what violence is and against which people riot, and nouns like *insurrection* lack a verb form to name the event as it is actively undertaken.) Consider also, for example, the progressive temporality implied in the modern meaning of the term *revolution*, which enables the pairing of the new with the improved and the old with the backward.

The third incongruence is between the dominant model of a

political regime emblemized by the bordered, sovereign nation-state and the variety of other political formations and social fabrics that were brutally destroyed to make room for its implementation, which often occurred under the banner of the “new.” Here again the problem is not simply that of vocabulary but of the materialization of a cluster of key political concepts in institutions, procedures, and policies that on the one hand were recognized as a global standard, and on the other appeared as the transcendental condition of any politics. Used in their nonqualified way, devices of violence such as “archive,” “revolution,” “sovereignty,” and “human rights” were institutionalized and promoted as empty and neutral forms. Far from neutral, these imperial devices facilitated the plunder and appropriation of material wealth, culture, resources, and documents, and generated the establishment of state institutions to preserve looted objects and produce a bygone past; the revolutionary commands to destroy existing political and cultural formations for the establishment of a sovereign state; and the repression and outlawing of people’s aspirations and formations of nondifferential discourses of rights.

The fourth incongruence is between the historical narratives about progress and the actual recurrence of the same forms of oppression, destruction, and exploitation, with very similar grievances, claims, and demands from people targeted by exploitative and oppressive systems. These narratives of progress as improvement remain possible as long as processes of deprivation, destruction, and dispossession are pursued by the unstoppable movement of the new, shamelessly generating narratives of modernization. Democratization, decentralization, and universal suffrage become the pillars of such narratives of progress insofar as differential citizenship is assumed to be natural or premodern rather than understood as a phenomenon at the heart of modernization pursued through subjugation. The same structure recurs in common narratives of the archive, which is often assumed to have been centralized in a distant past and then democratized with the emergence of the eighteenth-century revolutionary call for the right of public access to documents.

Omitted from these narratives proclaiming the progress of citizens’ rights is the violence that was involved in defining citizenship as a constituent element of *belonging to* the state rather than as a shared trait of cocitizens *caring for* a common world. This violence has three aspects: the appropriation of the commons by a sovereign power,

the transformation of citizens into external users or claimants who approach the commons (for example, the archive) from the outside, and the denial of access to those commons from those who have been made noncitizens. Reconstructing a variety of political species or archival practices without assuming that imperial institutions preceded their users—nor assuming that other, tenacious formations represent the democratization of those ur-institutions—is an essential trait of potential history.

These incongruences and tensions reveal the extent to which concrete lived experience is left out of the major coordinates and concepts around which historical narratives are produced and reproduced—narratives of people targeted by these institutions but also of those trained to study them critically. In trying to defend certain objects, values, modalities, and forms and questioning initiatives that endanger them, one is often intimidated by progressives who argue that what is done cannot be undone and that such demands testify to a suspiciously sentimental personality not attuned to today's world. Who would dare, for example, say “no” to funds to replace an old school building with new “smart” rooms that are well-equipped with the latest technologies, or to rescue a community archive about to perish by integrating it within an innovative architectural environment that would provide its documents—as if they alone were the archive's *raison d'être*—with better preservation conditions and the most advanced digital humanities platforms? Who would dare to say “yes,” that the arrow of history *can* be reversed, and that a wistful recovery of the past is not nostalgia but justice, and that at least some of the 400-plus Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948 can and should be restored even though seven decades have passed?

If one is tempted to push past these warnings, the fear of being treated as nostalgic or reactionary often leads one to give up. One is expected to be in tune with the pace of progress and to study neoliberalism (critically, or not), just as one studied previous *isms* without asking whom we are working for by presuming these concepts to be accurate descriptions of the world. This is not justice; it is reaction.

## Archival Technology

In my discussion of the archive I engage polemically with the Derridian theory of the archive and the historiography regarding the

democratization of archives in the eighteenth century, which embraces the narrative of progress and assumes the existence of a centralized archive as a *fait accompli*. I reconstruct the archive as a technology and foreground its constitutive violence exercised against other contemporaneous modes of engaging with and handling documents. Much before the archive became the site where the fantasy of “world history” or of a “universal history of humankind” from its early times could be materialized, it was a regime based on the allocation of differential roles and places to masses of people who were supposed to be kept in their “right place.”<sup>39</sup> The system of “passes,” documents authorizing enslaved people’s movement beyond their master’s property, is an important example through which the common narrative of the archive is challenged and its unstated objectives to facilitate differential rule are foregrounded.

Unlearning the archive as a place is instrumental in joining others who resisted against it in claiming that not everything should be archivable and that not all forms of relationship should be mediated by the archive. Not all documents and works of art were made to be collected, classified, stored, shown, or studied. These procedures can be advantageous and illuminating in some contexts and invasive and harmful in others. The prioritization of the documents and artworks, along with the transformation of the modes of handling them into neutral procedures, erase not only the concrete violence exercised here or there when particular archives were constituted, but also the entire context of imperial violence.

Through the study of practices of looting, spoliation, confiscation, and appropriation, I question the basis of the distinction between documents and objects, archives and museums, and the role such a distinction plays in the rise of specialized fields of expertise that enable different types of violence to be classified as *over*. Focusing on the looting of art from Congo and the institutionalization of modern art in chapter 2, I pay special attention to the standardized procedures for treating art objects and archival documents—collecting, salvaging, cataloguing, preserving, and studying critically—and read experts’ claims to neutrality with regard to the objects as a violent destruction of meaning. I show how other modalities of art were severely damaged

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39 See Foucault, “Panopticism,” 195–228.

by these cataloguing procedures, while the meaning of the artwork was established through seemingly neutral procedures that in fact emerged out of robbery and looting, acts that cataloguing continues to enable today. Through the study of a few catastrophic moments, such as the Pende Rebellion in Congo and the destruction of Jerusalem's photography scene in the mid-1940s, where people's deprivation of their art was implicated in their differential inclusion in sovereign body politics, I show the imperial origins of the imperative to produce and prefer the new—and then to process and catalog the stolen item as fitting into a designated museum or archive collection.

The new is intertwined with the neutral, that which is “neither one nor the other” and is hence acknowledged as being its own source of authority. With the archive, not only are the procedures of handling its collections considered neutral, but also the institution itself, which is founded on a claim to be a neutral body of preservation. This neutrality can be proclaimed and celebrated only after other archival modalities are obliterated, notably those that imply different temporalities. My focus is less on the manipulation of documents in archives and the ways archival materials have been made in/accessible to publics. Rather, my focus is on the violence involved in the implementation of practices and procedures such as collecting, classifying, studying, cataloguing, and indexing and on the institutionalization of these practices as neutral with respect to their objects. This constitutive distinction between the archive's cherished objects—documents—and its neutral procedures—preservation—endows the archive itself with neutrality, just as the handling of art objects through normative procedures endows the museum with its veneer of neutrality. Thus, imperial archives and museums were institutionalized not as imperial devices of violence but as nonqualified institutions, cornerstones of any political regime that is to operate properly.

The establishment of the archive as a neutral technology and state institution made it a model that the governed could use and other state apparatuses could imitate and adapt. The institutionalization of neutrality, as a model and at the same time as a technology of progress, enabled its accelerated propagation across very different contexts. The archive was established as a neutral threshold separating the past and the present, history and politics. Thus, the transfer of imperial archives from the colonies to Europe could be pursued not as a spectacle of looting, but as a matter of fact. When studying the institutionalization



of archives or museums together with the competing options that they violently sought to eliminate, their document/object-centered regimes emerge as merely one possibility and not the ultimate form of being together with these items.

The archive is a synergetic machine of imperial violence through which this very violence is abstracted and then extracted from the passage of time. Imperial archives continued to be established, under the same guise of neutrality, after the end of empires, now necessary for progress. This combination of the new and the neutral provided objective temporal markers for the transformation of nonimperial or anti-imperial formations into *pre-imperial* formations, which were seen as old and obsolete, doomed for destruction and in need of replacement by the new and neutral.

## Potential History

Potential history is a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present, colonized peoples from their worlds and possessions, and history from politics. In this space wherein violence ought to be reversed, different options that were once eliminated are reactivated as a way of slowing the imperial movement of progress. Potential history questions the inherent universal value of archival records that supersedes local litigation about the mode of their acquisition and rejects endorsing the archive's mission of sanctioning people's actions as now records of past achievements that cannot be rewound. It is out of this conflict between people's worldly active life and the imperially conditioned record of operative actions pursued in the service of progress that potential history unfolds. Potential history is not the account of radical thinking, of explicit ideological struggles against imperialism, but a rejection of imperialism's conceptual apparatus altogether. The imperial apparatus presumes that such struggles exist only in the past, only as dusty records in the archive.

Rehearsals of disengagement from the frenetic pursuit of the new are necessary if one seeks to see beyond the slicing of time into past, present, and future and to relate to actions classified as outdated and impracticable as concrete, common options. Rehearsing disengagement is the practice of doing potential history. Rehearsals begin by

replacing the imperial impulse to innovate with a shared right to participate in the common. The right to participate means that one's participation is—and should be—always limited and equally enhanced by others who also participate, by way of their presence, needs, aspirations, legacies, and experiences. Rehearsals involve the reiteration, time and again, of existing statements that were made obsolete by imperialism because they threatened to impede the motion of progress and the unlimited rights of some to pursue their visions for all. Rehearsals consist in repeating and reactivating what others have already said, established, performed, or written at different conjunctures before us, when they were subjected to different modalities of imperial violence. Thus, rehearsals of disengagement are crucial in avoiding the imperial temporality that asks us to seek new solutions for a better future. Situations described as failed moments of resistance to imperial power, the failure of which is taken as accepted fact, will be restaged differently: first, in order to retrieve a world in which this fact was not yet accomplished and the imperial condition could not be taken for granted; second, in order to enable these statements and modalities of protest, erased by imperial power, to emerge again as competing valid options.

My own rehearsals of disengagement have been vital to my study of major practices and institutions of modernity, such as human rights and sovereignties, in a way that combines accounts of the disasters of modernity with the civil potential they still hold. Deliberately assuming that precedents for acts of resistance or claim for rights exist, I reject the presumed newness of resistance to imperial formations that is ascribed to events such as the Haitian Revolution or to the first Palestinian intifada, as if they emerged from nowhere. Working intentionally to recover the uninterrupted existence of competing political models and concepts, I sought to qualify with them the seemingly neutral terms such as *sovereignty*, *the state*, *revolution*, and *human rights*. Rather than ordering repetitive statements by their chronological order or newness, I thought to distinguish them on the basis of their approach to imperialism and to depict them as competing formations regardless of their time, threatening and being threatened by imperial temporality of progress that qualifies statements as either old or new, conservative or progressive. This is crucial in emphasizing the intergenerational aspect of protection of non-imperial formations against imperial attempts to rupture such solidarity—and praise the murder of the father as the template of political order—and the dispersal of civil

actors prevented from publicly carrying out performances of rights-claiming, collaborative and intersectional actions.

## Sovereignty—A Form of Political Engineering

Imperialism is the expansion of the principle of movement, which storms as if nothing—neither the sacredness of places and practices nor the authority of tradition or law—can stop it. The path of this movement is plowed and its pace is accelerated with the help of a variety of political devices such as “self-determination,” “occupation,” “state lands,” “partition,” “repatriation,” “independence,” “treaty,” “peace agreement,” “human rights,” or “sovereignty.” These devices are used to render violence into acceptable political landscapes on a global scale. Regions of the world were partitioned, peoples split and enlisted to wage liberation wars, regional languages were murdered for the sake of standardized languages, and sovereignties declared, producing citizens whose status is the flip side of the status of noncitizens: slaves, refugees, infiltrators, or stateless persons. These devices have been essential to limiting political aspirations, narratives, and histories.

In the course of a few centuries, the world generated by relentless imperial movement became inseparable from this imperial political vocabulary. States, sovereignty, and the like became transcendental concepts, imposed as indispensable and necessary for political maturity to be achieved in any given place. Their omnipresence is inseparable from the process of invention of imperial standardized languages such as “French,” or “Italian,” at the expense of vernaculars and dialects.<sup>40</sup>

In this context, de Saussure’s work, understood as a universal theory of signs and still considered a necessary pillar of critical theory, requires our attention; his text simultaneously records and denies the repression of alternative discursive formations in the establishment of transcendental concepts such as “language”:

No matter what period we choose or how far back we go, language always appears as a heritage of the preceding period. We might conceive of an act by which, at a given moment, names were assigned

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<sup>40</sup> On standardized languages, see Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Non-linear History*, New York: Zone Books, 2000.

to things and a contract was formed between concepts and sound images; but such an act has never been recorded. The notion that things might have happened like that was prompted by our acute awareness of the arbitrary nature of the sign. No society, in fact, knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such.<sup>41</sup>

Though de Saussure studies the standardized language whose fabrication required the murder of local dialects, he formulates his argument about language as universal heritage (“no matter what period we choose”). In the same way, his argument on the arbitrary nature of the sign presumes the existence of a certain contract—“we might conceive of an act [...] a contract was formed between concepts and sound images.” But at the same time that he mentions that the existing languages that he studies are not the fruit of transmission and heritage but the outcome of a contract that was enforced, de Saussure makes sure that we will not look for this contract and tells us that it cannot be found: “But such an act has never been recorded.” Contrary to de Saussure’s claim, this contract was recorded and can be reconstructed from the opposition of people to its enforcement by not renouncing the use, invention, and transmission of their languages that were meant to be exterminated by this contract. But for de Saussure, similarly to other white philosophers who conceptualize what people have in common as if it were reducible to the imperially fabricated object of their study, the people are but a disturbance to the true existence of language.

By reconstructing imperial sovereignty as an apparatus of violence that eradicates alternatives and disperses the many who get together to expose and resist state violence, I will foreground other political formations in which people act as members of a shared world they are engaged in preserving, rather than acting as spokespersons for those institutions and formations to which they are enlisted and which they are required to represent.

One of the challenges in dealing with the concept of sovereignty is to show how the endurance of diverse political species in itself constitutes structural resistance to the imperial pretension to

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41 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966, 71.

differential sovereignty as a *fait accompli*. Care for the shared world and cocitizenship, which I will reconstruct as the common ground of competing models of sovereignty, by definition cannot be achieved through progress and the gradual extension of imperial citizenship to others. Eighteenth-century revolutions generated the figure of the citizen as part of a revolutionary “new beginning” materialized in the sovereignty of a republic. Paradoxically, though the protagonists of imperial revolutions promoted the relentless imperial movement of progress, in order to secure their rights in the plunder of others, they had to establish some institutions that contradicted this movement as it materialized in relatively fixed institutions and constitutions. This also revealed that it was not just the monarchy that stood in their way, as their spokespersons stated and as historians repeated, but also the many who imagined themselves to be cocitizens in the different polities that the revolutions established. Rather than relating to such foundational acts as barriers to the unstoppable imperial movement as Arendt does in *On Revolution*, I question the political new beginning and show it to be part and parcel of the frenetic and destructive imperial movement of the new, and hence incapable of stopping it.<sup>42</sup> Eighteenth-century revolutions halted pre-imperial forms of being together in a common world, even as they unleashed just these desires. Imposing a totally new beginning required violence against the many, who—like their predecessors in different moments and at different places since the “new world” was invented—sought ways to oppose the destruction that the new brought about and insisted on preserving parts of their worlds, in which they could continue to have active lives irreducible to the needs, visions, and enterprises of others. The present of the many was not a time-space unit placed somewhere on the road of progressive history, a stage along the path to progress, but the fabric of life.

My discussion of worldly sovereignty in chapter 5 is both theoretical and historical. Rather than assuming sovereignty to be mythically, miraculously, or hypothetically constituted (see, for example, Hobbes and Schmitt, among others), I reconstruct its slow and violent imposition from within and outside the archive, tracing the elimination of other options essential to the triumph of differential sovereignty.

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42 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York: Penguin, 1990.

Such options were identified with the enemies of the state, who were differentially included in the body politic and construed as dangers to sovereignty. Since it opposed monarchy, the sovereign formation that emerged through the violence of the eighteenth-century revolutions was called *popular*. Speaking in the name of “the people” (*demos*), even though “the people” consisted of a minority of the governed population, made it possible to render other, nondifferential formations of the body politic into predemocratic, backward, and outmoded political forms. The process of unlearning the imperial identification of the idiom “the people”—a minority of white males endowed with the status and privilege of citizens—is far from being completed, as I show in my reading of contemporary political theorists.

The colonization of “the people” is not just another tale about eighteenth-century nationalism. Studying an example of worldly sovereignty that I draw from 1947 Palestine, I show that right after the UN partition resolution was announced, a violent coup was unleashed by Jewish military and political leaders who ignored the local population and its mode of engagement with the existing world and engineered a new body politic by removing Palestinians and moving migrant Jews to populate the emptied places. This violence was part of a larger economy of violence that forced all the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine to comply with the new order and identify themselves with the new entity (as “Israeli”) at the expense of their existing cultural, communal, and spiritual engagements. The coup leaders were met with civil resistance mounted all over Palestine by both Arabs and Jews. The resistance lasted several months, during which at least 100 local civil alliances between the neighboring Jewish and Arab communities were established. Rather than assuming that Arabs and Jews represent two sides of a long-lasting conflict, I show that violence was used in order to fabricate and separate the two sides, and stabilize their relations in the form of an everlasting duel, “a conflict,” thus erasing and belittling the different modes of opposition to the constitution of Jewish sovereignty. Rather than examining the plight of Palestinians as an isolated event, I study it as part of the economy of deprivations and privileges constituted by the establishment of the regime and preserved through its reproduction. In this context I show that one of the major rights violated by imperial sovereignties is the right not to become a perpetrator, that is, the right not to act as a privileged citizen who complies with or acquiesces to the differential sovereignty from which she or he

benefits. On the basis of the demand not to be deprived of this right, I propose to study the emergence of the citizen as perpetrator.

## Citizen-Perpetrators

From its very beginning, imperialism has relied on socializing people into taking differential rule for granted, and the crimes they are interpellated to commit or witness become merely routine procedures of civility and governance. In fact, had people conceived of this behavior as natural, a proper way of being with others, there would have been no need to invest in socialization and the use of violence to punish those who fail to engage with others in modes of exploitation and subordination. Minor acts of resistance, gestures, and failures to act should be sought in the minute details of everyday behavior instead of major heroic acts. Even the weakest act of resistance or the slightest expression of reluctance is key to unsettling the legitimacy of differential rule as a precondition for the constitution of sovereignty. Weaving such acts of resistance coming from citizens together with oppositional acts coming from other groups of the governed, one can see what otherwise remains invisible: that the legitimacy of political regimes based on differential rule but presented as expressions of popular sovereignty has always been disputed and questioned.

Socializing people into a system of differential rule is not enough, however, to produce perpetrators. This book pays special attention to the division of roles in the theater of imperial political regimes and to the particular figure of the perpetrator that they cultivate. The perpetrator is not conceived here as an aggrandized persona, but rather as an ordinary man or woman, a citizen-perpetrator, whose actions seem ordinary to herself or himself. Citizens are often born into the position of the perpetrator by the mere fact of being born citizens or privileged members of a differential body politic. They take part in or acquiesce to crimes they have learned to see as proper law enforcement or part of missions accomplished in their fields of expertise. Their political lexicon is shaped under the imperial condition and abounds in moral gestures that further blur the not-yet-accounted-for violence and their own contribution to its preservation. Such is, for example, the foundation of UNESCO by imperial nation-states or institutions such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), acting as the guardian

of the Third World's cultural assets while denying their own implication in the holding and study of others' culture. Paradigmatic is the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transport of Ownership of Cultural Property, that respond to contemporary looting, thus naturalizing the presence of millions of objects stolen during centuries of imperial rule.

Citizens may take pride in sympathizing with the suffering of others, and they expect their fellow citizens and government officials to be moved in the same way. Yet when imperialism is unlearned, we see how inextricable their citizenship and its modalities of responsibility, concern, and morality in general are from the naturalized noncitizenship imposed on others.

As I noted above, under the imperial condition, no originary moment of moral decision precedes the moment in which one becomes a perpetrator. Complicity is part of being governed in a regime based on differential rule. In the course of a few centuries, the imperial enterprise of differential rule has become a transcendental condition of politics. Partaking in its preservation is the citizen's duty or task, the stakes of which can rarely be questioned. Being a citizen means taking part in imperial enterprises, participating in their crimes, and acting on their behalf without crossing a threshold where a decision of whether to collaborate in this or that abusive project needs be made. This substance of imperial citizenship—the scripted readiness of citizens to inhabit their given roles in the theaters of political regimes, as well as the difficulties of extricating themselves from them—are absent from discussions of citizenship in political theory. Occasionally, citizens compensate for being deprived of such decisions when it is most important—before they are implicated in the abuse of others—and, as individual political actors, they express a belated awareness of their deeds as on-duty soldiers, civil clerks, architects, doctors, lawyers, teachers, or simply citizens.

Undoing the celebratory narrative of citizens as sovereign subjects requires studying their fabrication as inextricable from the fabrication of noncitizens. Situated in the globally fabricated and governmentally engineered political field, this book depicts citizens as one of many governed classes—slaves, stateless, undocumented workers, and so forth—which partake in the governance of others through the technology of the archive. For citizens to be relegated to a position of exteriority and to a temporality of “post-ness” in which they are



imagined acting as respectful users of institutions that were founded before they arrived on the scene means to deny their imperial literacy. Situating imperial citizens as operators of the technology of the archive is an attempt to extend the notion of situated knowledge, which is presently central to feminist and critical race discourse, but absent from political theory in regard to the situated citizen.

Since the late eighteenth century, with the institutionalization of modern citizenship and the differentiation of people around the globe along racial axis separating citizens from noncitizens, the category of the citizen has become one of the most elementary components of the imperial condition. But it may also be one of the bases for overcoming this condition. This book is deliberately written from the position of a citizen, necessarily also a citizen-perpetrator, who is committed to the task of reclaiming a nondifferential, worldly form of cocitizenship situated in a shared world in need of repair. At the heart of this project lies an attempt to regenerate a discourse of rights from the ground of imperial violence as a reparative process of undoing the sedimented differences through which this violence is reproduced. Claiming the right *not* to be made a perpetrator is, was, and should again be a constitutive right of any political formation and guarantor of a substantial form of reparations. It is essential not only for any configuration of cocitizenship, but also for undoing the violence invested in objects, methods, and procedures so rights could be redistributed and their inscription in objects actualized. This book imagines and presents these rights as constitutive elements of civil alliances and worldly sovereignty. The possibility of reconfiguring the discourse of rights based on the template of the “right not to” is an attempt to disinvest from seemingly neutral procedures that enhance differential sovereignty and make perpetrators of us all.

## Regime-Made Disaster

The imperial enterprise is reproduced through its taxonomies, which generate, accumulate, and distribute differences along a triple dividing line encompassing the *temporal*, *spatial*, and *differential*. These taxonomic systems were used authoritatively to institutionalize people’s status and roles, types of activity, allocated freedoms, their uses of objects, and so on. Commanding time, space, and difference

consolidates the imperial condition under which regime-made disaster is the form of political regimes.

*Regime-made disasters* are disasters that are generated and reproduced by the structure of a regime based on differential rule. These disasters affect the entire body politic of the governed, though differentially. On the one side, there are groups that enjoy certain privileges, including considerable protection from the disaster, and on the other, there are groups that are deprived of different protective fabrics, thereby enhancing their victimhood, which is preserved through visualizations that associate them with the position and figure of the victim in the long term, relegating their plight to what I call “archival acceptability.” Yet this division between victimhood and privilege, accurate as it is, can be misleading in the study of regime-made disasters. These disasters do not only affect the direct victims and are not “their” problem, part of “their” history, as if the catastrophe in question takes place in an offshore territory. The challenge of this book is to reconfigure disasters as regime-made, in other words, disasters whose occurrence disregards its explicit target as defined by the triple dividing line and actually impacts in a much more diffuse way beyond and across its temporal, spatial, and political divisions. Understood as regime-made, citizens are not only mobilized to perpetrate them, but they are also impacted by them, though differentially, and like the regimes that perpetrate them, they are precisely what the entire governed population has in common.

Political concepts like rights, citizenship, sovereignty, or progress are used by statesmen to institute realities. Those realities are discussed and debated by historians and political philosophers or scientists, who study, measure, and evaluate them in relation to certain ideal types. Differential rule, differential body politic, and regime-made disaster are not part of the same family of concepts. Even though they articulate prevalent political configurations, they are not used to institute political realities. Their use makes it possible to study the larger economy of violence involved in the institutionalization of key political concepts, which typically converts the violence into either a repressed event in the past or an incidental aspect of the realities produced with these concepts. When modern republics were founded, differential rule had already been established. When statesmen devised rights and constitutions, they could do it in the delineated sphere they imagined that they inhabited—that of citizen peers. As in the Greek *polis*, mastering the

life of others outside the polis was the condition of freedom inside the polis. In this realm, statesmen, and subsequently citizens, rarely dissociated themselves from the enterprise of preserving the differential body politic but did not directly engage in it, either. The differential body politic is an outcome achieved through the use of different tools and did not exist as an end in itself. If it had, today's accepted political concepts could not continue to be discussed separately from the violence required to institute the corresponding realities. In the course of endless encounters between promoters of new worlds—entrepreneurs, settlers, reformists—and native populations that lived in those worlds but paradoxically stood for the old world that was to be reshaped, differential body politics were constituted by sovereign nation-states that comprised outpost territories as key elements of their genetic codes. As actors who were born into a world where the creation and proliferation of new states seem more like the completion of a desired process than the perpetuation of a disastrous political condition, citizens are often oblivious to their own mobilization in the name of progress, whose devoted agents they have become.

For imperial disasters to be reproduced as regime-made, the “discovery” of distant territories and the persona of the “discoverer” had to be reproduced in and through different domains of knowledge in which the discoverer's status, authority, and legitimacy could not be recognized as an infringement of the rights of people inscribed in these discovered places nor as violation of the common, which should not have been made appropriable in the first place. Calling attention to the centrality of the persona of the discoverer and its homologues in the quest for knowledge—the inquisitive mind, the art connoisseur, the philosopher—is key for locating the origins of modern citizenship in the imperial enterprise of plundering others' worlds. These personas' actions are performed through the invention of imperial rights—the right to discover, uncover, penetrate, scrutinize, copy, and appropriate—thus erasing (like the operation of the shutter) how appropriated objects (which made up the center of gravity of universal rights) were in fact plundered and in effect how the discoverer violated others' rights. As lands, objects, sovereignties, and rights are studied together, the discovery of “African art,” for example, by artists, art historians, and curators is not interpreted as the appropriation by individuals of individual objects, but rather as the institutionalization of a series of differences, such as between those who are capable of such discoveries

and are authorized to name them, and those who may be discovered, or worse, be neglected or relegated to a bygone past. While universal rights enable the moderate extension of these rights to others in a way that makes a certain mobility and inclusion of diverse actors possible, the accumulation of differences throughout half a millennium is left almost untouched, and its institutionalized form continues to be reproduced and to impact the scope of the different actors and how they can act and interact with each other.

## Performing Rights

Rights are reconsidered in this book as protocols for a shared world, an alternative configuration to the dominant discourse of human rights that is conceived and considered from the perspective of differential sovereign powers and emblemized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In such a discourse, rights are abstracted from centuries of imperial injustice and articulated in self-contained verbal statements, as if they were readymade units applicable anywhere and anytime, regardless of the material conditions of violence and inequality under which they should be introduced and exercised, and no matter to whom they are addressed. This sovereign universal human rights discourse based on abstract equality renders obsolete and irrelevant the real, concrete inequalities perpetrated by imperialism and inherent in the position of citizens in a differential body politic.

The diverse activities of building common worlds wherein people engage, even while enslaved or confined to a refugee camp, inspire me in reconfiguring a different origin for the discourse of rights. People are constantly engaged in building their place in the world that they share with others, and it is in their capacity as inhabitants of a place that they perform claims of their rights to this place—often in collaboration with others. Reviewing archival documents from the Freedmen's Bureau, I'll discuss the refusal of former slaves to be evicted from the lands that they cultivated while forced to work for their masters, presenting the crucible of eviction in these and other cases as symptomatic of the conflict between the hegemonic, top-down discourse of rights and the ways people envisage and make rights claims for their place in the common world. I will dwell on the presence of fellow citizens, who may not stop a given eviction, but support its direct victims

by acknowledging that they are not alone in perceiving the eviction as violence and by questioning the way their cocitizens are portrayed by the law's agents—as a threat to law and order. Using shared gestures, signs, and statements to resist the language of the law, those who assume people's rights to a place and protest their eviction imply that fellow citizens speak the same counterimperialist worldly language with whose inner logic, grammar, and vocabulary they are (sometimes unknowingly and certainly without inventing it) already familiar.

Enough has been destroyed since the invention of the New World that must be restored in order to enable the human condition, once trampled on, to become a barrier against this unstoppable motion. Reconstructing the language of rights used by people claiming their rights, I hear a quest to halt, to stop the juggernaut movement that exhausts people beyond their forces, a cry like “no, this is too much,” or “this is impossible,” cries that are antithetical to the one that commonly lures people to imagine their future and engage themselves in further grandiose enterprises: “Nothing is impossible.” Listen to the enslaved Abraham Johnstone, days before he was put to death in 1797, providing a rhetorical answer to the question he raised, of why “the most unheard of cruelties and punishments were daily inflicted on us”: “for not performing impossibilities, for not doing what was impossible for human nature or strength to have done with in the time allotted.”<sup>43</sup>

Wherever the stage was set for all possible imperial horrors, and governed people were not recognized as the “basis of power” required in order to govern them, the principle “*not everything* is possible” was the principle for which the most oppressed among the governed stood. Aware of typical conservative and liberal admonitions such as “don't ask for the impossible, be reasonable!” I dare to question the orientation toward the future, and the progress-oriented claim for the unheard of and the inconceivable, implied in slogans such as “nothing is impossible.” It is time to recognize that “nothing is impossible” is an imperial enterprise and promise that for centuries was embraced as a license to pursue outcomes that are unbearable for others and to engineer people to partake in their pursuit. The unbearable imperial condition cannot

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43 Abraham Johnstone, “Address to the People of Color,” in *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory 1787–1900*, eds. Philip S. Foner and Robert Branham, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998, 54.

be changed with this destructive call for the impossible in the form of a new beginning, which is part and parcel of the same imperial license; instead, it is the threshold of unbearability that should be restored and used in order to cry out, “not everything should be possible!” Based on the recovery of numerous incidents where people struggled against the violation of such thresholds, this book restores a different promise in the form of a barricade—the promise of saying *no* to progress. *No, this is not possible* is the cry people utter everywhere against those who acted as though nothing should limit them. Since innumerable abuses were waged against the human condition, the wheel should be turned back to rewind these violations and render them impossible again. To counter the imperial promise of a new beginning promoted through the three-dimensional imperial principle that constantly threatens the commons, this book is tuned to a different modality: that of rehearsal, reversal, rewinding, repairing, renewing, reacquiring, redistributing, readjusting, reallocating, and on and on.

To rewind is not to return to an idyllic moment in the past, but rather to refuse to recognize in the violent outcomes of imperialism the archival acceptability of its violence or to validate the separation of people from their objects and the material environment in which their place is carved. In my discussion of rights, I relate to objects as proof of one’s place in the world, as delegates of people’s worlds in the new formations into which they were forcibly integrated, and as the grounds out of which the commons and a shared political existence can be reconfigured. The constituent violence that Benjamin associated with sovereign regimes is only part of the story of imperial violence. Its other part is “institutional” and “procedural” (or “procedu-ent”) violence, whereby seemingly neutral procedures are imposed and serve to outlaw competing options in each and every domain, from art to politics, and to justify their violent repression and dispersion. Processes of rewinding are not an idiosyncratic academic invention but rather an account of calls, claims, projects, and formations that people have performed worldwide since the very beginning of imperialism.

Writing potential history is an attempt to undo the triple dividing line and relate to these performances not as belated responses to already accomplished imperial formations but rather as simultaneous competing options; not as coming from the outside of the inner space of the polity but rather from its core; and not as emanating only

from the victims who claim their due, as if citizens can be no more than potential respondents to them. Thus, I conclude that calls for reversal, restitution, or reparations are an inseparable part of a political ontology no less than violence is. Imagined, claimed, and enacted simultaneously by all those who are implicated in imperial violence—victims and perpetrators alike as cocitizens—potential history is the transformation of violence into shared care for our common world.