



INTERVIEW

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay – Unlearning, An interview with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, by Filipa Lowndes Vicente

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“In their own words”: Academic women in a global world

by Filipa Lowndes Vicente

I spent the 2016-17 academic year at Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island, USA). During the first semester, as a visiting scholar in the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies (Michael Teague FLAD/Brown Visiting Professorship), I gave a seminar entitled “Travels and exhibitions: writing, collecting and displaying the world in the 19th and 20th centuries”. All through the second semester I worked on several research and writing projects, making extensive use of the university’s excellent open-stacks library, while attending the countless conferences, seminars, and documentary sessions on offer. It was during this period that I had the privilege to meet and spend some time with the six academic women I decided to interview: Areej Sabbagh-Khoury (Palestine), Ariella Azoulay (Israel), Leela Gandhi (India), Lina Fruzzetti (Eritrea/Italy), Meltem Toksoz (Turkey), and Vazira Zamindar (Pakistan).

Of these six, the only one that I already knew was Lina Fruzzetti, who had spent almost the entirety of her academic career at Brown University, having arrived there as a young woman in 1975. Thanks to her friendship with fellow anthropologist Rosa Maria Perez, Fruzzetti had been to Lisbon several times to present her work. In 2007, she and her husband, Ákos Östör, also an anthropologist, had organised an exhibition and presented a documentary at Museu Nacional de Etnologia, in Lisbon, which really impressed me – *Pinturas Cantadas – Arte e Performance das Mulheres de Naya*.

Ariella Azoulay, on the other hand, was already a household name in my field of study, and I was delighted to learn that she had arrived at Brown a few years before to take up a job as full professor. In the spring semester of 2016-17, I had the opportunity to attend an open seminar organized by Azoulay on the visual archives of slavery.

I did not know the other four scholars. Some of them were tenured professors at Brown, others were passing through like me, with a variety of affiliations with the university. What all of them had in common was that they came from places in the world far from the us and Europe. They came from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and all had a reflective and politicized relationship with the place where they were born in and resided for some part of their lives. Some had been in the us for many years, after going there to study – Lina Fruzzetti from Ethiopia, and Vazira Zamindar from Pakistan. Meltem Toksoz had lived in the us for years, earned her doctorate there, but then returned to Turkey. Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, a Palestinian, and the youngest of the six, had just arrived at Brown. Others, like Ariella Azoulay and Leela Gandhi, had already studied and taught elsewhere in the world and in the us, before being appointed by Brown as part of a recent university policy to hire exceptional academic women.

All of them impressed me for their intellectual and academic work, as well as for their engagement and activism with the worlds they live in. Several of them came from places where conflicts have been raging for decades and had made this their object of study and critical reflection – Palestine-Israel, India-Pakistan, for example. All of them challenge both the past and the present with hard questions. None of them had followed a straightforward academic path. They all epitomize how work and life are one and the same and how one can (and should) be both an academic and a citizen. All of them defied the comfort of the idyllic and artificial life at an Ivy League university campus, where one can so easily forget about the outside world when surrounded by squirrels and songbirds on peaceful, tree-lined streets, or libraries as accessible as they are abundant and diverse. All had opted for “restless” paths and interests. And, of course, they were all women, in an American context in which Donald Trump’s recent victory, on 8 November 2016, reminded us on a daily basis of how gender and racial equality, social justice, and the universality of citizenship had to be constantly cared for, protected and affirmed. The renowned African-American civil rights activist Angela Davis reminded the audience at a conference she gave at Brown University around the same time I did these interviews, “freedom is a constant struggle” (the title of her 2015 book, and the first one of Davis’ books ever to be translated and published in Portugal, in 2020).¹

1 Angela Davis, 10 February 2017, conference titled “Freedom is a constant struggle”, Salomon Center for Teaching’s DeCiccio Family Auditorium at Brown University; Angela Davies, *A Liberdade é uma Luta Constante. Ferguson, a Palestina e as Bases de um Movimento*, →

Though all the interviews took place at the end of the 2016-17 academic year, only recently did I have the time to edit and make them ready to print, with the help of the *Análise Social* team. I thank José Manuel Sobral, the journal editor, and Marta Castelo Branco, the editorial assistant, for their interest in this project and for the support in transcribing the interviews, which are lengthy and hindered by the limitations of an interviewer like me, without any technical or methodological knowledge of how to conduct an interview. With my out-of-date iPhone, almost always outdoors, in campus cafes, or sitting on the grass while enjoying the spring after Rhode Island's long winter, I have unintentionally ended up giving the people who transcribed this series from oral words into written ones a fair amount of additional work.

Since these interviews were done in the form of a colloquial conversation, rather than with the scientific legitimacy of a predefined script, I chose to “withdraw” from the text as the person asking the questions, listening and directing the conversation. The interviews were transformed into direct speech in which the different themes were edited and are divided into sub-chapters. Hence the name I gave to this series – “In their own words”.

I am delighted to finally be able to start sharing with more people a small part of how much these women have to say. And, paradoxically, or maybe not, many of the issues and events we discussed in 2017 remain just as relevant today – three years later: Trump and Erdogan are still in power; the conflicts and tensions between India and Pakistan only intensified with the “Hindu India” idealized by Narendra Modi; and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues just pressing as ever before. Thus, despite the time elapsed between their spoken voices of 2017 and their written words of 2020, it made no sense to be interviewing the same people again with an ocean between us and a pandemic outbreak imposing social distancing.

I begin this series – “In their own words” – with Ariella Azoulay because the book she was working on at the time of our interview, in June 2017, has now been published, and much of our conversation was devoted to it. Azoulay herself explains the reason for such a lengthy gap between the publication of her last book, in 2012, and this one that has just come out, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (reviewed by Afonso Dias Ramos in this issue of *Análise Social*). During that interval, the author wrote, published extensively, curated archives and exhibitions, gave innumerable lectures and taught. Now, Azoulay has published another book on a par with *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2008) and *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology*

of *Photography* (Verso, 2012), works that have shifted paradigms and critical thinking, and were translated into several languages (but not yet into Portuguese).

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay arrived at Brown University in 2013 to become a professor in both the Department of Modern Culture and Media and the Department of Comparative Literature. The courses she has taught include: “What is colonialism? Archives, texts and images”; “Not with the master’s tools: freedom, enslavement, emancipation, and reparations”; “Photography and human rights between the end of World War II and 1955”; “Revolutions from the 18th century to the present”, including the French, us, and Santo Domingo revolutions, and the works of Olympe de Gouges and Hannah Arendt. Still other courses are “Around 1948: interdisciplinary approaches to global transformations”, taught with Leela Gandhi; “What are human rights? Imperial origins, curatorial practices, and non-imperial ground”; “Archives: histories, practices, theories and formations”, and “Visuality and visual theories”.

The book that Verso, the London and New York-based editor, has now brought to light – *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* – is yet another text that invokes a sense of “before” and “after”. It is a book for those who work on imperialism, material and visual culture and their intersections with politics, but also for those who think about the world in which they live and want to understand it better. Above all, it is a challenge for those who want to “unlearn” everything they know about imperialism – an ambitious and creative reflection on 500 years of politics and thought and, above all, a long exercise in deconstructing the ways in which we were taught to think and write; to teach and read; to reproduce and repeat. It employs more than 500 pages to unlearn 500 years of imperial history. It is much harder to “unlearn” than it is to learn.

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Ariella Aïsha Azoulay – Unlearning

THINKING OF PHOTOGRAPHY: HOW TO BE A SPECTATOR OF IMAGES

Why did I start to address photography? There are different such moments of beginnings that come to mind, so let me choose randomly one. As a citizen of imperial states, like Israel, you are exposed to images of others in unjust situations, coerced under different types of violence, as part of the normalization of this violence. Violence exercised as part of what I call regime-made disaster is

premised on citizens' compliance with its normalization. Unlike the common assumption, this kind of regime counts on its citizens as spectators of its violence. Imperial states elaborate a repertoire of positions of spectators promoted as ethical positions, and citizens are invited to act as denunciators of wrong or as those who reveal the truth. This is a trap, since this position is being normalized as part of this regime of violence. I felt that something is wrong with this position, and I did not want to inhabit those imperially scripted positions in which we are made spectators of the plight of others designed by the state. Positions offered to us by apparatuses such as the imperial democratic state should be refused, as they are part of the mechanisms that normalized and justified what we see. This includes what is considered the moral position of criticizing and speaking back to power, that invites us citizens to speak above the heads of those who are oppressed by that power. While I understood this quite early, the question of how to participate differently in photography and how to theorize and historicize it differently was a much longer journey.

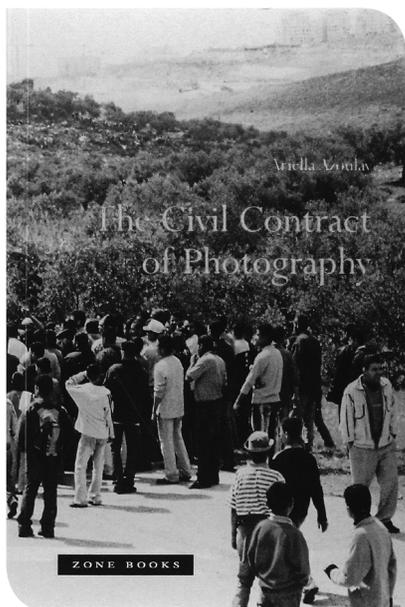
When I started to think what is photography, I was a curator of a public space in Tel Aviv. I was troubled by this position that came with a certain knowing-how that made me feel uncomfortable, but here again, it took me time to understand what bothered me. What I felt about photography and curatorial work was not unrelated. Both positions are intertwined with critical discourse, while they are also implicated in institutional work that is implicated in the reproduction of violence. The question of how to untangle this became a priority. I was also aware of the possibilities that are folded in these positions to engage with political situations that require redress that can start with reconfiguring practices, gestures, language, etc.

My engagement with photography departed from this tension— between the impossibility not to address images of violence, produced by the political regime under which I lived, and from the understanding that the institutionalized positions of spectator ought to be rejected. The first refusal that I remember, relates to the imperial temporality that separates the tenses and defines the temporality of spectators as that of those who come *after* the fact. The second refusal is linked to this idea of “speaking truth to power.” This felt more like part of the problem rather than a way to address it. After all, speaking back to power is a privileged position, part of one's citizenship, and if citizenship in itself is part of the regime-made disaster that exercises violence, a citizen has to question this privilege. Un-documented or non-citizens do not speak truth to power, they act differently to expose the truth of power. Thus, from the very start my study of photography was inextricable from my study of citizenship. I developed the term and practice of *Potential History* much later, but in retrospect I can say that the *Civil Contract of Photography* was my first

systematic attempt to provide potential histories of both photography and citizenship.

In relation to the local context of Palestine where I lived, the question became how to problematize the position of the critic denouncing what is being done to Palestinians, without questioning what does it mean to be an “Israeli.” In other words, the question became how not to look at this violence exercised against Palestinians as something that happens at the margins of the Israeli regime, but rather at its heart. When it came to the position of spectator, the question was how to foreground the role of Israeli-Jews as actors in this regime of violence and how to reject the position of the external spectator. This required a theorization of the way citizens are being produced by imperial states as disavowed perpetrators, who can let this regime last forever without acknowledging their implication in its reproduction. The goal was to criminalize the position of citizen in and of an empire state, and to expand the imagination of co-citizenship among the governed as shared reality, that is at the same time, the basis of a competing model of sovereignty against the existing one. Citizens have to question their citizenship and acknowledge that the imperial state invests in making them citizens-perpetrators. A revolt against imperial citizenship can have only one meaning – the return of those who were made refugees. The struggle to end the violence against Palestinians and to stop blocking

their return to Palestine is inseparable from the struggle to abolish the position of citizen-perpetrator. To eliminate any confusion – I’m not talking about symmetry between what is done to Palestinians and what the same regime is doing to the Jewish citizens of the state of Israel by socializing them to inhabit the position of perpetrators. Without thinking about this together, one doesn’t get the full picture of what I call regime-made disaster. I wanted to study and recognize what this imperial regime was doing to me, to other citizens when it lures us to “look at the pain of others”² to use Susan Sontag’s book title. This position should be refused since it normalizes that others are made the object of this spectator’s gaze. It felt wrong and it is wrong. It normalizes the



2 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London, Penguin Books, 2003); Portuguese edition: *Olhando o Sofrimento dos Outros* (Lisbon, Quetzal, 2015).

distribution of violence along ethnic, racial, gender, and national lines. The question became how to think the position of spectator as accountable to those with whom one is governed, i. e., those excluded from citizenship. The position of spectators is professionalized, studied, historicized within respectable fields of knowledge, as if spectators and those being depicted in those images are living in separate worlds. One of the major endeavors of the *Civil Contract of Photography* was to dissociate photography from “the profession,” from its conceptualization based on the persona of the expert be it photographer or critic, and to acknowledge that the photographer, although endowed with rights, authority, and authorship – was never alone in the event of photography, and should have never been recognized as the sole owner of the photograph. The photographed person is always there and participates in the making of the photograph.

**WHY DOES PHOTOGRAPHY MATTER
TO POLITICS AND CITIZENSHIP?
*THE CIVIL CONTRACT OF PHOTOGRAPHY (2008)***

Being looked at by the photographed persons – by the Palestinians who were captured in photographs I was seeing every day in the newspapers – was the trigger for *The Civil Contract of Photography*.³ The part of the photographed persons in photography was stolen from them when the photographers and other imperial actors were institutionalized as the sole rights owners of photography, and the challenge was how to transform the ontology of photography so that their part would become obvious again. Once I was able to use the language differently to account for their presence, there was nothing more obvious than their participation. Photography was imposed and institutionalized as a productive practice whose products belong to those who own and operate the means of production. Thus, its histories are often those of devices and those who excelled in their use. *Unlearning the Origins of Photography* and *Potential History* are attempts to topple down these separate histories of photography, and consequently of other disciplines. The invention of photography didn't start with the device but with the political regime that enabled photography to rob people of what they had and could have had, and to articulate this as *documentary* practice that shows from the outside who they are and the state in which they live. Documentary photography... Yes, like many others, I also started as a client of this ideology. Even today, I still have to tell

3 Ariella A. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT; Zone Books, 2008).

my students that they no longer have to pay this tribute to documentary, and they can start elsewhere, with imagination, fabulation, abolition, if they want to withdraw from positions scripted by imperial regimes. Unlearning photography, like many other discourses – for example political theory – means changing the anchor of one’s commitment and prioritizing the commitment to abolition of imperial and racial capitalist formations over what disciplines and institutions expect us to respect. Simply put, the question became how can photography and political power be described “from below.” Why “from below” with quotation marks? Because it implies that power operates from above. So why use this metaphor at all? Because it inspires us to think that when we come to account for formations such as politics and photography, we must account for all the participants and stop describing them as if they ever operated only unilaterally.

Decolonizing key notions, assumptions, and institutions, is a long process which is still incomplete as long as the system in which they make sense and are normalized is not utterly abolished. Decolonizing sovereign conceptions of photography and political theory in the *Civil Contract* meant reconfiguring each term that I was using out of what people were actually doing, rather than confirming existing scholarly assumptions about what photography is. We say that a photographer is taking a photograph of “something” but what exactly is she doing, what is it that is being taken and how. When a world is invaded with a military army – like for example the invasion to Iraq – what is the meaning of speaking about a photographer as the one who took a photograph and own it, while everything was open for her or him to seize what is there?

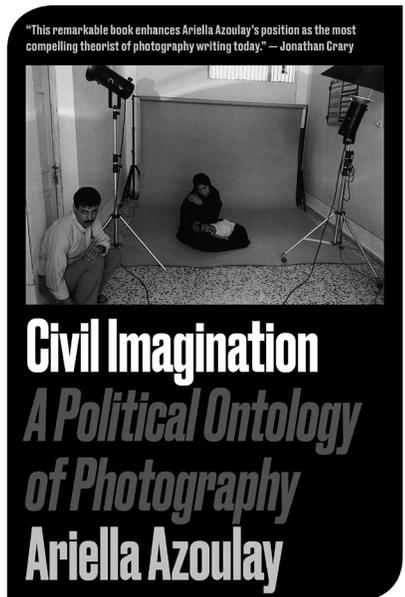
**“SHARING THE WORLD TOGETHER”:
THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHY (2012)**

The *Civil Contract* helped me to think about violence as a form of sharing the world, and as such, to see the manifestations of violence as what define the shared world. This is a different way to account for images of violence. Going back to the example of photographs of Palestinians, the non-citizens of the Israeli regime. Against the ideology of the photographer as the one who reveals what is being done to them, which reproduces the imperial mode of distributing rights that defines who can show what to whom, I sought to understand what is this world that Jews and Palestinians share and how do we share this world. My assumption was that if we account for all the participants in the realm of photography, we can experiment and rehearse with different ways of sharing the world than those defined by imperial sovereignty, invested in keeping us apart under the rule of enmity – either or. Reading against the assumed

omnipotence of the photographer, I started to reconstruct photographs from the point of view of the photographed persons and to identify their participation in the event, as well as their power to generate this event. In other words, instead of studying photography from the point of view of the one who is “taking a photograph” I looked how people are magnetizing the photographer and intervening and shaping something that I started to call the “event of photography.” This event, it became clear, is not an exception to the rule represented in “a photographer is taking a photograph,” but the rule. The photographed persons are always there.

This required the reconfiguration of the ontology of photography, not its epistemology, and recognition that this is not ontology of what is being produced – let’s say a photograph – but rather of the condition of getting together. This is what I called the *political ontology of photography*.⁴ In *The Civil Contract of Photography* I speculated on the existence of a civil contract (in distinction from the tradition of the social contract), that I then labored to find its manifestations at different places and times, as proof that speculation is never simply speculation, but actually an attempt to provide the language with which the participation of others can neither be denied, nor the power we exercise against them when the existing language that makes them irrelevant, invisible, or uncounted is being used. Therefore, the idea started to be: let us acknowledge the ways in which people were always engaged with photography, not only the photographers; and let us account for the ways in which they were engaged in photography.

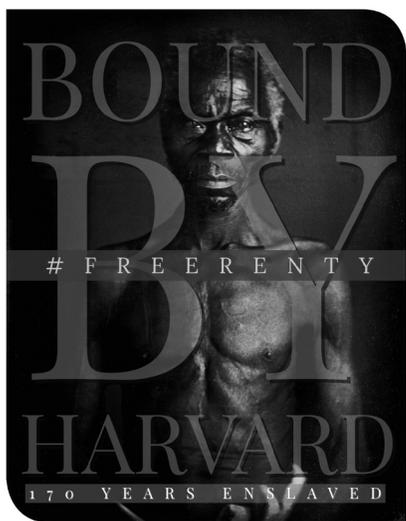
Often, when people speak about photography they actually refer to the photograph, the image, the file or the piece of paper on which an image is printed. Thus, when they speak about the photograph they tend to forget that a photograph is on the one hand, a product of an event of photography, and on the other hand, that the photograph itself generates another event of photography. When a camera is introduced to a certain place, we can already speak about an event of photography whether a photograph is taken



4 Ariella A. Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography* (London, Verso, 2012).

or not. In many languages we are being lured to think about photography as a productive practice – “a photographer took a photograph” – in a way that creates a continuity between the photographer’s labor and the photograph as its product, and the interdependency between the photographer and others is not inscribed in our descriptive language of photography. Thus, millions of colonized people, or other dispossessed groups, could become the “raw” material of the production of photographic wealth. The racial capitalist logic dictates, though, that the wealth extracted from the event of photography belongs to the photographer or to those who have control over her work. This productive conception of photography, removes from our consideration and imagination the event of photography that occurs when the camera doesn’t produce a photograph but nonetheless acts upon others. Once we cease seeing photography only with productive terms, we can start to see how photography operates – it generates wounds, violence, wealth, or hopes. What it generates is not owned by nor can be explained only from the perspective of the producer, who claims ownership over what could not be produced without the participation of the photographed person.

This question of ownership is crucial when it comes to images of “slaves” or “refugees.” Owning them means captivating them under this category forever.



Source: Free Renty!, all rights reserved by Shonrael Lanier, SVG on Demand.

This is what Tamara Lanier, who filed a lawsuit against Harvard University, argues when she demands “Free Renty” and expects the immediate restitution of the daguerreotype of Renty Taylor, her great grandfather who was enslaved. Similarly, a photograph of a “refugee,” deprives the person who was forced to be a refugee to appear as a person who refuses to be evacuated from his home(land) and become a refugee. The spectator is invited to acknowledge that person as forever refugee, since the spectator is assumed to come after the event was decided. The scripted position of spectator who comes after, is made to deprive us of the right to refuse to recognize people in the political categories that are imposed on them. This is premised on the assumption that

the photographed person and the spectator exist in two separate temporalities. Interacting with the photographed person as if we share the same world, testifies to the fact that the photographed person’s claim for remedy and redress is not over.

WOMEN AS PHOTOGRAPHERS, SUBJECTS AND CRITICAL
THINKERS ON PHOTOGRAPHY

In the last couple of years I've been working in and on a collaborative project with a group of women who are engaged in photography in different ways: Susan Meiselas, Wendy Ewald, Leigh Raiford, and Laura Wexler.⁵ We generate a potential history of photography through 120 different projects. We are not interested in creating genealogies of influences or using the canonized scholarship of media study – mainly white male philosophers – to read photographers' images as "texts." Photographs are not texts to read, even though part of our interaction with them includes such reading of what we are looking at. Let me give you two examples from this project, in which we study the various aspects of collaboration, and how interdependencies are used and abused to build and destroy worlds. One of them is the series of portraits of Algerian women that are associated with the French photographer Marc Garanger. Garanger published two photo books about the Algerian war. One dedicated to these portraits of women only, and the other in which you see some of the brutality of the colonial regime. The point is to reject the canonization of these images as standing alone, and to avoid reading these portraits, as if they – and these women – are given to our gaze, but to ask what enabled them to become the objects of our gaze and how can we interfere in the normalization of us as their spectators. Rather than showing these portraits again outside of the condition that enabled their seizure, we juxtapose them with other images, in which one sees the elements of state terror including tanks in the city and the concentration camps in which these women were already terrorized when their portraits were taken. There are two questions here – how not to transform the Algerian war into a background but to understand the layers of collaboration that are at stake, and the different degrees of violence involved in each of them, and how not to let these images continue to be printed as portraits for our gaze but as elements within a broader regime of violence. Before being the photographer of these images, Marc Garanger was a soldier in the French army that was responsible for the deportation, internment, massacres, and oppression of the local population. Though Garanger opposed the war, as a French citizen, he had to collaborate with the military, and he offered his skills as a photographer. Though he saw the systemic violence of the French colonial project in Algeria, he collaborated with the officers who sent him to bring 200 images a day.

5 "Photography consists of collaboration: Susan Meiselas, Wendy Ewald, and Ariella Azoulay". In *Camera Obscura. Feminism Culture and Media Studies*, 31 (1 (91)), pp. 187-201, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-3454496>.

to call “potential history.”⁶ It is history because it is about things that happened, one is tempted to say, *in the past*. Given that through these experiments with archives I understood the past as imperial invention, I knew that this is not history, this is actually what we are made to believe is past, over, hence irreversible. The refusal to see what started to emerge out of these archives as history, generated potential histories.

The first photographic archive was engaged with forty years of Israeli occupation – 1967 to 2007.

The archive made clear how manipulative is this periodization and the conception of temporality on which it draws. 1967 is a key moment, but it reiterates and reconfirms the violence of 1948, which became the center of the second archive.⁷ This is the moment of the destruction of Palestine and the manufacture of a political body based on the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians so as to create a Jewish majority. The archives were a laboratory to ask questions about the formation of the political body, the division of time and



6 Title of the author’s last book: Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London, Verso, 2019).

7 Much later, at Brown University, Ariella would teach a course together with Leela Gandhi named “Around 1948: interdisciplinary approaches to global transformations” in which they explored the significance of this historical moment in different regions of the world.

space, and how these three are interrelated. Through the composition of these archives the question “what is an archive”, pushed me to ask questions about the political ontology of the archive and question its identification with the institution in which papers are being preserved. The archive, I show, is a technology of violence. This is at the heart of the third chapter of *Potential History*.

In preparation of my one semester as visiting professor in 2010 at the University of Connecticut, I returned to an old copy of the *Family of Man* that I had when I was in high school.⁸ The *Family of Man* was first shown in 1955, but its curator, Edward Steichen worked on it as a post WWII project. Through this proximity between ‘45 and ‘48 I started to understand the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 – part of which was conducted under post WWII’s terms such as “repatriation” – as part of the legitimization of mass deportation by the Allies. In Europe, twelve million people were transferred from one place to another because “they did not fit.” Germans, Polish, Ukrainians, many of them were forced to move. This only in Europe. In the colonies millions were constantly forced to move.

1945 and 1948 ceased to exist as two separate events. This work on the archive led me also to study what was manifestly not in it. I studied the violence exercised by the Allies, as part of their self-fashioning as liberators, and I was struck that the mass rape of German women at the end of WWII was not included in the imagination of the end of the war. At this point I already knew enough about how the rape of women is constitutive of the creation of a democratic regime. I worked on it toward an exhibition shown in 2016 at the Pembroke Hall at Brown and then in Leipzig at the F/Stop festival. *The end of the world as we know it, ist der Beginn einer Welt, die wir nicht kennen* (is the beginning of a world we don’t know) was part of my exploration of the question when do we speak about war, what is its “beginning” and “end.” These were not abstract philosophical questions, but on the contrary, parting away from philosophy and reconstructing the way imperial actors – military, statesmen, and capitalist monsters – provide us with the grammar of the language we use. They define when wars begin and end, they define what museums and archives are, since they establish these institutions with the power, labor and wealth that they expropriated from others. It doesn’t mean that scholars do not invest time and energy to reinterpret or counter-interpret these terms, but they do it based on the realities these terms already assisted in imposing. They can argue about

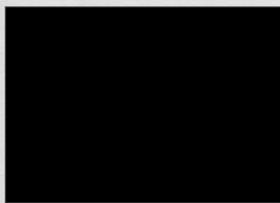
8 Exhibition catalogue: Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1955); see Ariella A. Azoulay, “‘The family of man’: a visual universal declaration of human rights”. In *The Human Snapshot*, eds. Thomas Keenan and Tirdad Zolghadr, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2013, pp. 19-48.

the date when a war was ended, but it is within the limits they define that the war is a delineated event. What I tried to do with concepts such as “regime-made disaster” is to replace imperial terms and show that these campaigns of violence are constitutive of these regimes and not external to them. Thus, rather than seeing the end of WWII in the defeat of those who were defined as the enemy – the Nazis –, and nuance the end date, I expand the field and study the violence that those who defeated the Nazis used also against other groups: women, colonized people, and non-whites. This opened a new question – how can the political ontology of photography help us to engage differently with existing (and non-existing) photographs to account for a large-scale campaign of rape? Given that there is no polemic around the fact that one million



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FROM THE RUINS OF THE BRICH



Unkenn photograph, May 1945, Berlin. Women carry a wounded woman to the hospital so she can receive medical assistance after being raped (at least 50,000 women sought medical aid after being raped in Berlin alone).

Original listing 1962. From *The Ruins of The Reich - Germany 1945-1949*. Crown Publishers (p. 70).



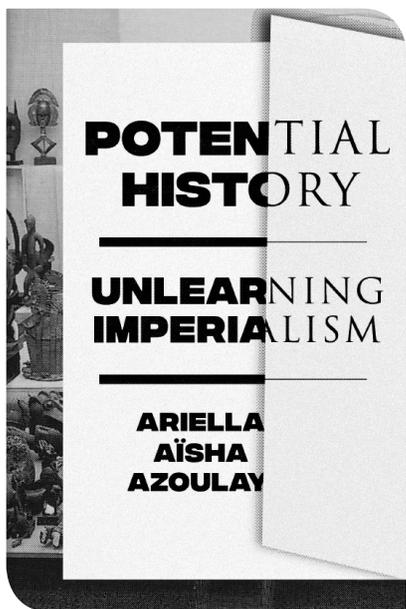
German women were raped, how to address the fact that the numerous images taken during the same time do not mention or refer to the rape?

I am interested in photography as it gives us access to a shared time and space and it is up to us, spectators, to claim what is – or ought to be in the photograph.

**THE SLOW MAKING OF *POTENTIAL HISTORY*:
500 YEARS OF IMPERIAL EVENTS**

These archives that I created sparked the notion, and actually the space of *Potential History*.

When I moved to the us I saw Palestine everywhere. It felt like being in the matrix of the settler colonial state I knew so well. The differences in scale are telling from different points of view. For white people here, the us is a *fait accompli*. For most Israeli Jews too – Israel is a *fait accompli* but the size of indigenous population in Palestine who live between the sea and the river, is the same as that of the Jewish group, so the Israeli self-understanding as if the state is theirs and for them, is constantly challenged by half of the population. They are invested, in one way or another, in disavowing the size of the indigenous group and oppressing its members who suspend the completion of the settler colonial state. The demography of the us is different, and indigenous people, though their incessant struggle against the colonial state led to some incredible achievements like the NAGPRA, or sovereignty in some territories, these achievements do not keep the settler colonial project open on a daily basis. An American can be born and die without experiencing the challenge that indigenous people's claims pose to their political imagination and organization. Native Americans' claims relate to the land both to what was expropriated from them and to the large-scale damage to the land from any point of view. The way blacks are differentially included in the body politic, is also resonant with the familiar imperial structure of the differential body politic. However, this differential inclusion of the blacks is different, since it is the continuation of the major crime of slavery that still today, awaits its full abolition. Despite those differences, the denial in the us of the need to abolish, repair and allow return, resembles the Israeli denial of the Palestinians' right to return to Palestine. This is how I found myself in *Potential History* studying 500 years of imperialism. Unsurprisingly it brought me back to Spain and Portugal, from where my maternal family was expelled in 1492, and to understand this expulsion – a paradigmatic act of manufacturing the body politic – as a constitutive part of the imperial condition. Moving to the us transformed my manuscript on which I had already worked for five years prior to that, and it took me



another five years to finish *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* in the us.

I wanted to think within this unity of 500 years without pretending that I know 500 years of history. No one does. The question was how to deal with it not as history but as the infrastructure of the always-present impulse of people to bring an end to racial capitalism and imperialism. I was interested in identifying the political condition that is common to all these different places that came to be part of the globalized imperial world and to study them, from the perspective of those who didn't cease to oppose the completion of the imperial project. Undoing the figure of the "expert" and the academic violence reproduced through fields of expertise became important threads of the

book. Imperial experts operate mechanisms of domination and exploitation based on separation of time, space, and the members of the body politic. In the academia, the occupation of Palestine is studied as an exceptional case, apartheid presents the South-African too as an exceptional case, the segregation in the us as yet another case, and slavery is produced as belonging to a distant past while its consequences and the institutions that enabled it – the legal system, museums, police and archives – are still in place.

DEALING WITH THE REMAINS OF IMPERIALISM: EXHIBITING, WRITING AND TEACHING BEYOND "BUSINESS AS USUAL"

The looting of objects, archives and photographs is central to the book. One of the places I studied is Congo, while insisting on not becoming an expert of Congolese art, questioning this persona of the art expert who was shaped by and enabled through the looting of those places. As long as these objects are still held in Western museums, this persona is by definition implicated in the looting. What I try to do in this study is to reconstruct the campaign of looting and how it shaped out the academic and museum landscape, and to make restitution pertinent to each word I'm writing about, and respect the limits and boundaries the colonized posed on what should be studied from their world. One has to unlearn the academic training of becoming an expert and to question the interpellation to excel in domains that perpetuate violence.

A few years ago, Renzo Martens invited me to look at this case of looting: he was engaged together with a local group of artists – CATPC –, in a transformative project of reclaiming land, shaping a collective, reversing the gentrification economy, and renewing ancestors' skills and knowledge. Studying the imperial looting of Congo in its relationship with political theory enabled me to re-conceptualize human rights, and to define what I call “rights in objects.” Some of these initial thoughts were published in connection with an initiative at the Pergamon Museum, in Berlin, with Syrian and Iranian refugees as museum guides: *The Right To Live Where One's Culture Was Museified*. The general argument, developed further in *Potential History* is about the rights of people inscribed in the objects looted from them, objects that continue to be held in Western museums. These people – like those trying to reach us borders from Latin and Central America, claiming entrance to states that invaded and destroyed their cultures, or to former colonizing states – belong to these objects. Instead of considering them as “undocumented,” I argued that these objects are their solid documents.

After many years of distancing myself from the world of art, through unlearning my initial training as art lover and curator, in *Potential History* I was able to engage with art again, but differently. These looted objects cannot just be studied – they have to be restituted in order to open up possibilities to participate partially in their modes of being in the world. This requires undermining the foundations of museums and the related professions.

We cannot continue “business as usual.” In my class “What is colonialism?”⁹ that I teach at Brown University several times, rather than sending my students to historical museums on colonialism, I send them to the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston. I ask them to roam around in the art galleries and bring their findings about colonialism. It is amazing how differently they look at objects in art museums, when they go there equipped with only some basic knowledge about looting. Therefore, more than looking at images of violence or atrocity, I am trying to foreground the imperial violence from objects and images that continue to be perceived as benign.

My exhibition *Errata* co-curated with the former director of the Tàpies Foundation, Carles Guerra, in Barcelona, is the outcome of a long dialogue. We currently exchange letters in the website of *Foto Colectana* [The exhibition was in Barcelona from 11-10-2019 to 12-01-2020].

When I'm thinking about the collapse of imperialism I cannot avoid the metaphor of a nuclear facility that should be decommissioned carefully. Its

9 “What is Colonialism? Archives, texts and images”; “Potential History Lab: what is slavery?” and “Potential history of photography: collaboration”.

collapse is instant, it should just end, but dealing with the damage and wound it leaves in people's mind and bodies requires directing all resources from production to recovery. Imperialism cannot just be dumped and you move on. It created huge, huge, huge material remains that we now have to ask how to decommission. Enough of thinking about exposing these crimes as a way to go. The question is what to do with all that was already exposed or was in the open to being with. How do we decommission imperialism?

Israel is a good example because of its scale and because of the persistence of Palestinians not to let go of their right to return, to think through it to the end of an imperial project. It was erected like a monument to state that Palestine doesn't exist. But Palestine exists and the Palestinians demand to return to their homes. This cannot be denied forever. The question is how to dismantle the Israeli regime and let Palestine be. This doesn't mean transfer, partition, and impose more differential principles. This means recalling the worldly sovereignty that was in Palestine when Palestinians and Jews cared for their shared world. I discuss this in one of the chapters of the new book. The lesson of potential history, learned from all those who aspire to realize their right to return and repair, is that you don't have to imagine a different future, you have to look backward and reclaim what was there that contains other potentialities for the entire body politic. We should not be afraid to imagine going back, rather than going forward. There are many debts that await to be paid, resolved, and the damage mended and repaired. Rather than producing more violence with futuristic plans, rather than thinking with a terminology of growth, we should think about doing less and repairing what was destroyed but persist in a painful way. Return, repair, and reparations are the substance of this book.

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