

A READING EXPERIENCE IS NEITHER TRUE OR FALSE BUT ALWAYS A FICTION - (S.M.)\*

What historical narratives of everyday resistance can do is not necessarily generating hope, but (at least) encouragement in what seems like a resistance in the every day. They can also allow for a sort of shift—within oneself—to refuse the dominant narrative of Emancipation (that of slaves, and from that one, a refusal of all sorts of Narratives of emancipation from colonialism, or heterosexism). Such practice, as an extension of Saidiya Hartman's work from *Scenes of subjection*, would be a form of unlearning. Remaining in the Outside: of the frameworks of the dominant history. In her refusal of the Narrative of a single event which, if it happened, would liberate all Black people of America, there is a whole conversion, a reorientation of political energy that will no longer wait for a founding event but will focus its attention on daily practices.

However, even when we turn our attention to these everyday practices, and once we abandon the usual trope that accounts for slavery through violence, and accept that the narratives available to us will never be those narratives of linear and heroic resistance that we have learned to long for, then what can we say about slavery that is not simply a repetition of the dominant order that generated it?

Fiction therefore stops being (only) a formal choice but becomes an ethical, and therefore political, necessity.

\* S.M. stands for Salma Mochtari, V.B. stands for Virginie Bobin

ENOUGH WITH HISTORY AND ON WITH THE ARCHIVE FICTION - (S.M.)

When she reads French thinker Michel Foucault's work on the ways in which people are subjected to power, Saidiya Hartman understands one thing: Foucault was not thinking of black people or slaves in the Americas when writing that history. From this failure, from this void, she came to write a thesis, published in 1997 under the title *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Her critical, almost incriminating calling—how could Foucault neglect that history when he was so interested in subject /power?—was for me an essential starting point. It doubly extends the question of the archive—why did Foucault not consider this analysis worthy of being conducted, of being investigated, as an object of knowledge, on the one hand, and even if he had decided and undertaken it, would such an analysis have been possible? Or rather, what analysis would it have produced?

Our problem (and that of Hartman) becomes all different: is there any way of writing a subaltern history within the knowledge-power framework? Or to rewrite histories of abolition or independence in the light of a history of the subject, or of several subjectivities? Although seminal, are the critiques that Foucault articulated towards the historiography of his time, sufficient to write a history of the subaltern, or is the paradigm of presence its plague, what keeps erasing and silencing those who couldn't leave a trace? How about our contemporary uses of history as a political-decolonial tool, as critique, how do they relate to issues like: writing, resistance, or even emancipation? If we are to explore them, how can we write about lives whose only (present) traces are the violent ones that destroyed them? How to give an account, through fragments of archives, of real lives and existences marked by relations of power so powerful that they can only tend towards a system of domination, established and stable?

EMBODIED COMMUNITIES - (V.B.)\*

More than a publishing space, Qalqalah **قَالَقَالَه** was conceived as a place of attachments, where long-lasting collaborations and relationships could be cultivated. As a collective, it is important to note that Qalqalah **قَالَقَالَه** does not speak unanimously: we all intervene from different positions and experiences, with heterogenous relationships to the languages and stories we engage with. Thus Qalqalah **قَالَقَالَه** is also a place where to reflect on these relationships from affective and political perspectives. During the conversation with Ariella Aisha Azoulay, a moment particularly resonated with us, as it suggested that "potential history" could also be a method to approach the formation, and the maintenance, of communal bonds across the established boundaries of time, space and institutions:

"Whatever we are trying to do within the institutions in, and with which, we are working is important; but we should not forget that institutions were built in order to deprive us of other possibilities to be in the world and care for it. I am thinking first about the role these institutions play in destroying communities, and in normalizing the existence of institutions that are not made for and by the communities where they are located. Hence, the major question is how can the things we do contribute to transforming the condition under which we work, in a way that they will generate a community anchored in shared physical spaces. Museums did not only destroy communities; they also exist against the idea of localized communities, since they are made to cater to the disembodied 'community of art lovers'—actually the art market and the nation state. In the name of such imperial entities, artists are being encouraged to 'break the walls' of the museum and work with 'distant' communities that they don't know. We have to stay with the problem that imperial institutions created, and continue to pose it—instead of solving it for them, or participating in eliminating the problem.

One of the major problems with the kind of work that we are doing, is that it is not inscribed in a community as something that can continue the day after. Museums invite us to focus on content—and more particularly on objects—and forget the people. In a way, we are trained to act as disembodied actors, dissociated from communities. We know only sporadic and ephemeral moments of embodiment-in-common—such as protests or strikes, moments when people get together to care for their world. We embody a variety of gestures, many of which escape our awareness. Others bind us not to see the imperial premises of our 'liberatory actions,' the political concepts that determine them, and the temporal and spatial separation that they sustain. But our bodies also carry other gestures, anti-colonial by their nature, which we have to rehearse with others, including members of previous generations whom we have to join in their struggles, rather than inventing new ones. We should not only try to invent our peers, we should also invent modalities for reenacting the communities that we were told are over."

Ariella Aisha Azoulay, 2022

She is probably referring, in an interview to the *New Yorker* (Alexis Olewo, "How Saidiya Hartman Revisits the History of Black Life", Oct 19, 2020), to Michel Foucault's "The Subject and Power", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 777-795, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982.

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ENOUGH HISTORY - كَفَانَا حِكَايَا / NE ME RACONTE PLUS D'HISTOIRE

About Qalqalah [www.qalqalah.org](http://www.qalqalah.org)

Qalqalah **قَالَقَالَه**'s editorial committee is composed of Line Ajan, Virginie Bobin, Montasser Drissi, Victorine Grataloup, Vir Andres Hera and Salma Mochtari.

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Qalqalah **قَالَقَالَه** is an editorial and curatorial platform dedicated to the production, translation and circulation of artistic, theoretical and literary research in three languages: French, Arabic and English. It relies on translation as a tool for the production and reception of situated knowledge, capable of making visible the relations of power and the possibilities of invention and affection that are at play between languages, temporalities and contexts that are marked by the colonial legacy, conflicts and contemporary revolts.

The signs illustrating this glossary are adapted from a series of visual scores conceived by artist Anca Benera during the workshop *How (Not) to Disappear in Translation; Listen to the eyes; Distort; Get Lost in translation* (marker pen on A4 paper, 2023). They propose a graphic interpretation of these scores. The original drawings can be viewed here: <https://qalqalah.org/en/activities/enough-history>

FROM NOVEMBER 2022 TO FEBRUARY 2023, THE EDITORIAL AND CURATORIAL COLLECTIVE QALQALAH **قَالَقَالَه** (REPRESENTED BY VIRGINIE BOBIN AND SALMA MOCHTARI) WAS INVITED TO BE A RESEARCH AFFILIATE AT THE THEORY DEPARTMENT OF TANZQUARTIER IN VIENNA.

Under the title *Enough History* / كَفَانَا حِكَايَا / *Ne me raconte plus d'Histoire*, we experimented with various formats of artistic research and modes of collective study to investigate the modalities under which art discourse uses, fabricates and embodies truth-making through specific regimes of narration.

Narrative is here as much a place where legitimate power-knowledge discourse is played out as a place where micro-modalities of collective resistance can emerge. Accompanied by artists and thinkers, we reflected on ways of unlearning imperial approaches to the archive, of fabulating historical narratives for the future, of hearing testimonies mediated by translation and of navigating multilingualism within institutional dynamics.

The title *Enough History* / كَفَانَا حِكَايَا / *Ne me raconte plus d'Histoire* originally came up in French. Then, we kind of struggled to translate it in the same evocative way to English and Arabic. In English, we tried to amplify our weariness of hegemonic, unitary historical narratives. In Arabic, the title takes a more collective turn: we are speaking as a 'we' (the we being Salma, Line Ajan and Montasser Drissi, fellow Qalqalah members), expressing the same weariness of not only History, but specific stories and their ways of being told; while questioning the authority of History thus replaced with histories, or even stories.

Our research unfolded in three public moments: — *Potential h/Histories*, an online conversation with scholar of political theory and photography Ariella Aisha Azoulay, which addressed some of the notions presented in her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso 2019), such as potential history, rehearsal, rewinding, the interrelations between art and theory, and strike. — *An infrastructural investigation of a worldly future*, a film screening and conversation between artist Mohamed Abdelkarim and curator Salma Mochtari. We talked about the post-apocalypse, working with linear and non-linear timelines and infrastructures. — *How (Not) to Disappear in Translation*, a 2-day workshop conducted by Virginie Bobin, based on a script emphasizing different relational, ethical, and political aspects of what occurs when translation intervenes to mediate and complicate processes of storytelling, witnessing and listening within the codified space of the law.

A glossary can only display one possible set of meanings, responding to a given context. It is also a writing form in itself, a mode of story-telling, suggesting once more a troubled relationship to the contingent truths that words carry along. This form serves as a repository of traces, documents and conversations generated over the course of the affiliation. It brings up more questions than it answers. It is produced with several thinkers and artists in mind: our conversation with Ariella Aisha Azoulay was seminal to the rest, although our readings of scholars Saidiya Hartman and Eve Tuck, and reminiscences of Dead French Philosophers theorists of history like Michel Foucault, were of company.

The recording of the conversation is available on <https://qalqalah.org/en/conversations/potential-h-histories>



# GESTURES OF UNLEARNING - (V.B.)

Excerpts from our live conversation  
with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay on November 3, 2022.

- Virginia

Your book was shaped through a series of gestures, which allowed you to practice “potential history” in embodied ways: covering sentences in historical books; tracing images with pencils or scissors to refuse the expected spectator’s position; collecting and assembling postcards, objects and documents. Your exhibition *Errata* (Tapiès Foundation, 2019, HKW, Berlin, 2020) presented 8 projects as “part of an attempt to intervene in the imperial grammar of photographic archives, to interfere in imperial knowledge printed in books, to unlearn imperial structures such as nation states, borders or status of ‘undocumented’ imposed as fait accompli and to foreground the imperial origins of numerous gestures inherited by scholars, artists, photographers and curators, and used in their practices.” In your film *a work like a jewel in the hand* (2021), you are making a necklace out of a collection of coins that you inherited from your father, in order to “reclaim, awaken and revive your muscular memory.” Could you elaborate on some of these gestures, and how they informed your approach to theory? How do they enact what you call “rehearsals”—of disengagement, of not becoming an expert, and as “a mode of being with others differently”?

- Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

These experiments with gestures are necessary to undo the imperial formations under which we live. But we cannot think that in, or with, gestures alone we can really exit the imperial project, because imperialism is based on the imposition of clusters of gestures that we repeat inadvertently. Often times when I speak about gestures, I speak about unlearning imperial gestures, to enable our different types of memory to awaken and guide us in rehearsing these gestures differently, reversing them. We cannot run away from the malediction that imperialism operates through our bodies and our gestures, and these should intentionally be unlearned. (☹️)

In *Errata* I shared my rehearsals, both as a political theorist and as a scholar of photography, in unlearning the foundations of these disciplines, and their institutional formations. *Errata* was an experiment in unlearning gestures that were—or could have been—mine, as someone who was shaped by two colonial projects in an expansive imperial geography across three continents. (☹️) Unlearning photography enabled me to understand it not as a device-based technology of picture making but rather as one of many imperial technologies—alongside partition, destruction, nation building, or archiving. Photography could be shaped as an extractive practice since it was built on 500 years of imperial technologies that were already implemented in different places as the infrastructure that determine people’s actions. Hence, photography should not be understood as anchored in the gesture of taking a photograph but rather in the gesture of taking from others what they had—in continuity with other similar gestures of imperial plunder. We need to acknowledge the genealogy of our gestures, and the way they were imposed on us to erase other inherited gestures; for example those of the *anusim*; or other anti-imperial actors who, despite repression, sought to transmit other gestures and convey something else through them. (...)

In the film *a work like a jewel in the hand*, I am sharing my attempt at awakening the muscular memory of my ancestors, Muslim Jews who lived in Algeria and practiced a variety of crafts, notably metalsmithing. They did so until the colonization of Algeria destroyed their self-understanding as Muslim Jews, by breaking the infrastructure of craft-making apart and by forcing them to identify to what the French defined as their faith. Rehearsing my hands, my eyes, and my body is a way of inhabiting this Jewish Muslim world in which Jews were those allowed to deal with precious metal. Copying different jewels that my ancestors produced is a way of inhabiting this Jewish Muslim world that imperialism tore apart and proclaimed inexistent.

# STRIKE! AN ESTHETICS. DAILY PRACTICES OF REVOLT AND RESISTANCE - (S.M.)

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s *Potential History* contains five calls addressing museum workers, photographers, historians, “the governed,” and us all, each beginning with an act of imagination. In these calls, she gives concrete examples of how strikes are already taking place. Over the past years, we have seen several examples of strike and/or protest specifically addressing the artworld’s entanglement with colonialism, extractivism and exploitation (Occupy Wall Street and the Strike Art! movements in the US, Art en grève, La Buse and the Documentations platform in France, to mention just a few). Within Azoulay’s framework and conception of strike, we can imagine a foreground for art’s micro-revolts to become concrete gestures of institutional refusal and repair in the here-and-now.

In the first call she proposes “to consider the strike not [only] in terms of the right to protest against oppression, but rather as an opportunity to care for the shared world, including through questioning one’s privileges, withdrawing from them, and using them.”

Later on, addressing art workers, she invites us to imagine “a strike not as an attempt to improve one’s salary alone but rather as a strike against the very raison d’être of these institutions. (☹️) a strike not out of despair, but as a moment of grace in which a potential history is all of a sudden perceptible, a potential history of a shared world that is not organized by imperial and racial capitalist principles.” She also calls on historians to “imagine [them] ceasing to relate to people they study as primary sources. Imagine them turning their discipline from one that seals destruction in the past to one that tells stories that prepare the ground for the reparation of imperial crimes.” Finally, she asks us to “imagine the entire body politic going on strike against imperial sovereignty’s scripts and expectations to protect its fabricated form.”

# GAZING ... UNSEEING, ABOUT MOHAMED ABDELKARIM'S FILM - (S.M.)

In *Gazing ... Unseeing* (2021, 7’50), we are in 2063. The film tells the story of an ecologically conscious, “back to nature” community called Bawadi al-khudr. The film—which I see as more traditionally narrative—tells a story. In 2050, something happens—the Nile water overflows—, yet it is not a natural disaster. The Bawadi al-khudr community is stripped of its land by a corporate giant. A series of discrete, less than disastrous events take place—riots, surveillance technologies, corporate extractivism and powerful companies transform a landscape. At least, this is what we hear. But the image tells a different story. Actually, it tells several stories. Cairo is present, yet it is stripped of its people. Unrecognizable to the Western gaze. Within it, there is a juxtaposition between an old Government, in an old Capital, and a new, surveillance-based, highly equipped government, in a new capital.

Both in *Gazing ... Unseeing*, and *A song for the Loose Destiny* (2022, 15’), bodies seem to be secondary when facing the landscape. Yet they are present through their voices, songs, slang, stories. Floating in water, or in our imagination. Abdelkarim’s work navigates corpses, time, ghouls, and infrastructure. It shifts: speculative archival practices are replaced by a paradigm of location, of the imperial witness, of empty Cairo and the remains of Zollverein. Of the places that shape subjectivities, defining their own time sequences. Imposing temporalities, effacing them.

# REFUSING NEUTRALITY - (V.B.)

In *Potential History*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay debunks the claims to neutrality that disguise and justify some of the violent operations sustaining the production of historical narratives, archival institutions, legal enactments or artistic spaces. She calls for us to unlearn, and disengage from, “the institutionalization of neutrality, as a model and at the same time as a technology of progress,” in order to enable non-imperial modalities of being in the world with others.

In Mohamed Abdelkarim’s film *A Song For The Loose Destiny* (2022), viewers are projected into the abandoned Zollverein coal mining industrial complex: shutdown machines and the desolated landscape bear witness to both the neutralizing effects of world heritage discourses—Unesco describes the site as a “remarkable material evidence of the evolution and decline of an essential industry over the past 150 years”—and the exploitation of humans and resources. We hear the voices of sentient, machinic beings who suffer from memory lapses, striving to narrate their past and their present. Their U.S. English is marked by a diversity of accents—traces of embodiment and socio-historical structures: in “The Displaced Voice”, Iman Mersal describes an accent as a “transparent metaphor for relationships of power which imprints the speaker’s voice and affects its relationships with others. (☹️)”

An interpreter working in the field of asylum rights once told me that she had been compared to a robot, a supposed guarantee of her neutrality. Yet, “every accent revives an event you experienced,” said another one. “You absorb everything,” expressed a third. During the workshop *How (Not) to Disappear in Translation*, the impossible neutrality of interpreters who work in governmental institutions was not only discussed through moral and ethical lenses, but also through embodied gestures of care and resistance, which could manifest almost imperceptibly—in spacial positions, the direction of the gaze, speech intonations or the volume of the voice.

Iman Mersal, “The Displaced Voice,” in Maha Maamoun and Haytham el-Wardany (Eds), *The Middle Ear*, Sharjah Art Foundation, 2011, p. 26-34. Translated from Arabic by Lisa White.

# REHEARSALS IN NOT DISAPPEARING - (V.B.)

Three drawings produced by artist and researcher Anca Benera during the workshop *How (Not) to Disappear in Translation* were reinterpreted by designer Maëlle Brientini to compose the graphic signs troubling the reading of this glossary. The drawings were conceived as possible scores to refuse, or evade, the invisibility and neutrality that are often expected from translators and interpreters, especially in the field of asylum rights.

Interpreters who work for institutions evaluating asylum requests are daily exposed to stories of violence, which they are charged to render intelligible to legal ears. According to Didier Fassin and Carolina Kobelinsky, in these institutions “the truthfulness of the alleged victim is being judged in order to discover whether their past experiences and future prospects match what really happened (are they telling the truth?) on the one hand, and what defines asylum (do they meet the conventional definition of a refugee?) on the other (☹️).” However, “they operate in a context where public discourse increasingly casts doubt on the validity of the majority of claims. (☹️) In a little more than half a century, we have moved from a regime of trust, (☹️) to a regime of distrust, in which an accumulation of evidence is increasingly necessary but rarely sufficient.”

Interpreters are also affected by this “moral economy of suspicion,” since translation is historically marked by an imaginary of treason. Caught in-between two regimes of truth-telling, interpreters are expected to maintain a strict neutrality, i.e. “to become invisible,” “to disappear”—as they often repeated in our conversations. In reaction to this impossible demand, some of them explained that they learned to consider their interventions as a performance, a role play. In *Potential History*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay analyzes imperial sovereignty through the lenses of theater. Against “the differentiation of roles [that] is imposed, performed and maintained,” she calls for “the recovery of wordly sovereignty (☹️) [through] rehearsals with others, who are disengaged from their assigned political roles (such as citizens, undocumented, refugees and so on) (☹️).” The testimonies of interpreters bear witness to such acts of disengagement—of refusing the role assigned to them, i.e. to disappear. During the workshops, together with interpreters, social workers, researchers or artists, we attempted to rehearse how an affected/affective practice of translation, by refusing neutrality and disappearance, could enact a possible form of political resistance.

Didier Fassin, Carolina Kobelinsky, “How Asylum Claims Are Adjudicated: The Institution as a Moral Agent,” in *Revue française de sociologie* 2012/4 (Vol. 53), p. 657-688

Or marranos, Jews who lived in the Iberian Peninsula and were forced to convert to Christianity by the Catholic state, but continued to practice Judaism in secrecy.