

3

Archives: The Commons, Not the Past

The primary offender, responsible for subsistence, was the municipality of the capital; and their seat of office was the first object of attack. Early on the Monday morning a multitude of excited women made their way into the Hôtel de Ville. They wanted to destroy the heaps of papers, as all that writing did them no good.¹

Rather than representing the weight of the past, the overabundance of archives inherited by the revolutionary government was instead increasingly judged by its weight in paper. Authorizations to sell documents to paper dealers and to the army to plunder administrative archives for gunpowder funnels grew in frequency during the lean war years of 1793 and 1794 when paper was officially classified as material of prime necessity.²

The ultimate goal of the [National Security Agency] is total population control [...] but I'm a little optimistic with some recent Supreme Court decisions, such as law enforcement mostly now needing a warrant before searching a smartphone.³

Soon we agreed on a price, a straw was picked up by the owner [of the house] and handed to us, he saying “Chubika.” The straw was broken between our fingers, he spat on his end of the straw and threw it over his shoulder and told us to do the same with the end we had. The bargain thereby was sealed.⁴

We asked men for dates, or for their ages, and they could never tell us, but would mention an occurrence which took place when the stars fought together and fell from the elements.⁵

Being born in a place called Israel, I was born an Israeli citizen. I was born a citizen of a state whose *raison d'être* is to make the place of its construction, Palestine, nonexistent. The state, as well as my citizenship, are predicated on an archival regime. For my Palestinian companion who was expelled from Palestine in 1948, going to Israeli archives is not an option, because under the imperial regime of the archive he was deprived of the archives that existed in Palestine and was made first a

vagabond, then a dweller of a refugee camp, and soon after an “infiltrator”—a Palestinian who threatens the imperial sovereignty of the state of Israel. International law appended another brutal category that made of him a stateless person, a person with no papers at all. His noncitizenship is also predicated on an archival regime.

We cannot even reach the archive threshold. He is not allowed to enter the archive, because he is not allowed to enter the state that was established in his homeland. My privileges and his prohibitions are the outcome of the imperial archival regime. In his company, unlearning the archive—either as an institution or a building—is not an abstract mission or theoretical question. In his company, the spatiality of the archive as a walled institution collapses, and the knowledge that he never could have come with me—though both of us are genuine products of the archival regime—becomes an indispensable part of the ontology of the archive.

Unlearning the archive as dictated by its official mission starts with a disavowal of the spatial and temporal regime it institutes, a disregard of the contours of the threshold as marked by its guardians, a refusal to enter the building and study my companion in his absence. Though my companion is dead, his existence is not over or past, and it is only with him that I could learn to no longer enter state archives.

Institutions are often embodied in buildings whose entrances are ceremonially marked by a threshold that differentiates between inside and outside. An archive’s threshold proclaims that beyond it lies the past for professional and amateur historians to study. The common definition of the archive—an institution tasked with the preservation and protection of documents—is, in effect, tautological as it repeats the mission marked by its own threshold. The actions and effects of imperial institutions exceed their demarcated walls. The threshold materializes the negation and repression of the archival regime. The archive as an institution took shape a few centuries after millions of people in different places were already forced to embody imperial archival categories, part of a growing and unstoppable ruling operation of classification, tagging, and naming of different groups to form a human index. The names, tags, types, and categories varied. They could designate a group of people by the services and labor expected of them, by their status within a local system of exploitation, by the name of the continent on which they lived or from which they came, by the name given to them by Europeans, and, most often, by exploitative measures that determined how much of what they have or who they are could be levied from them. In general, they were classified by the extent to which they could be instrumentalized and exposed to violence while still continuing to toil and labor for others. The name or category itself is less important than the differences instituted between them. Because this classification system came to order social life, it was an archival regime operated by the

many. People began to recognize each other as corporeal instantiations of these differential categories. Thus, the archival regime was established before the institution of the archive was built: the regime made the institution thinkable. My assertion is that to be governed under imperial rule, to have one's political identity issued through and confirmed by archives and their categories, is already to be engaged, in one way or another, with the archive.⁶

The archive as institution assists citizens in forgetting that their citizenship is related to the deprivation of citizenship from others, so that they could protect their privileges as rights and demand to fully exercise their right to enter the archive as if it were just a depository of documents open to all. They continue to ask the archive for documents *about* those who are deprived of this right, as though the archive, being one of the major players invested in the naturalization of imperial categories, can produce anything other than propaganda files. Unlearning the archive with a Palestinian companion means rejecting all the archival designations that since 1948 have made him an "infiltrator." The "undocumented" person inscribed in archival documents ought to be considered and imagined as a cocitizen, a companion in any exploration of political categories and institutions. It is only in his presence as a companion that his experience and understanding of the meaning of expulsion, of the body politic, of citizenship, of accountability, of rights and worldliness can be preserved from erasure, not as historical anecdotes but as constitutive of our political language.

His claim is encapsulated in his firm presence in this image—kneeling and holding his stick as an anchor to the ground on which he belongs, rejecting threats and pleas to move on (see Fig. 3.1). As a companion, his depiction as a prisoner of war is refutable, while his claim not to be deported cannot be dismissed. Rather, it is magnified into one of the rare photographed grievances from the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people that captured a firm gesture of opposition, a refusal to the imperial shutter. Such an image serves as a reminder not of how Palestinians comply with the destruction of their world, but of the extent to which the apparatus of imperial democratic regimes made the existence of such gestures of refusal unimaginable for several decades.



Fig. 3.1

Asking “what is an archive?” with a Palestinian companion is part of my attempt to make our actions—his in 1948, mine today—coincide in space and time, even though he is still forced to live outside of the body politic of which I am a part. He is not only excluded because he is no longer alive, but also because his gesture of refusing to leave Palestine dates back more than seven decades. The temporality and spatiality imposed and epitomized by imperial archives doom his claims to either a closed past or to an arrival from a pastness that marks his refusal as a violation of the law that was not yet in place when he refused. In turn, the temporality and spatiality of the imperial archive mark my claims as, at best, belated expressions of solidarity with his plight.

Only as cocitizens who share a nonimperial imagination can we unlearn the archive and its imposed ontology that Palestine no longer exists simply because it was declared gone and that Israeli citizens are held to be the living proof of this extinction. Only in his and other companions’ presence could I write this book in which imperial spatiality and temporality is reversed and insist on my companion’s belonging as preceding his deportation.

Engaging with archives was made a form of discipline, it provides proof of the imperial citizen’s identity, that is, of one’s place in the imperial world, of different degrees of political skills that open or close different doors and allow access to certain services based on one’s capacity to provide the right passwords. This engagement also endows people with self-confidence, occasionally with external recognition of being good citizens caring for the law that stands for the common good, the good order, and even for the next generations. Since the eighteenth century, an almost messianic

language has been involved in the institutionalization of archives worldwide. Archives were advocated as a form of salvation; an incarnation of the promise to tame individual lust for power; to defeat negligence, weariness, and arbitrariness; to overcome the frailty and vulnerability of individual memory and oral and corporeal traditions—in sum, to survive human mortality. This does not belittle its violence, nor should its uses be belittled.

Rather than a delineated institution with a threshold through which we are invited to believe we enter and exit, the archive is a regime of coordinated thresholds—what I have called *imperial shutters*—that underwrite the shared world. Unlearning the ontology of the archive as an institution is to make perceptible the violence exercised outside the space that the archive claims as its own, violence that renders obsolete other forms of being-together in the wake of its materialization.

Time Lines

To engage with the histories and modalities of the archive from outside the position it shapes for us as citizens or as scholars requires unlearning its latent progressive temporality. Time lines consist of milestones in the form of wars, conquests, revolutions, constitutions, laws, establishments, institutions, foundations, and inventions, initiated and imposed by imperial powers. They operate as shutters, slicing the commons into pieces, closing and sealing moments by fixing them in time. Time lines inaugurate the major axes along which people's incommensurable experiences are processed in terms of ownership, authorship, and succession. Major campaigns of violence are converted into major historical events, organized along axes of progress: exclusion to inclusion in the history of citizenship, from laymen to experts, from amateurism to professionalism, from anarchy to institution, from heavy to light in the history of technology, limitless daily labor to the eight-hour work day in the history of labor. Their attendant revisions turn the incommensurable experiences of people into a rigid tale of advancement. Thus, for example, a time line of the length of the workday emerges as a sign of progress and imperial modernity concealing the fact that the reduction of people to a measurable labor power was forced upon people in the name of this modernity. After all, before the imperial movement of destruction, people were not forced to work for their living, and their active life (*vita activa*) was not reduced to a relentless race. It is only by relating to them as always already reduced to their labor power, through the omission of the original violence of coercing people to become laborers, that any improvement in their condition can be made a milestone in the path to their progressive liberation.

The time line is not a re-presentation of time, but rather a technological device operating with various degrees of tolerance. The imposing power of institutional time lines is such that for any

narrative to sound accurate, it must be “situated historically”; for example, it must be anchored by the beginning or end of World War I or World War II; the creation of the state of Israel, or the United States, the Fourth French Republic or the Third Reich; the establishment of the first public library or national archive.⁷ Yet by relying on such temporal markers and declared missions of these institutions, such histories necessarily confirm them as objective descriptions. Time lines ensure that events, objects, and people are in their “right place”—temporally, spatially, and politically—so that scholars or laymen can confidently measure changes along time, evaluate novelties, judge directions of influence, assert originality, determine and devalue derivatives, differentiate the unprecedented from precedents, and proclaim turns and turning points. By doing so, they either gain hope that history is bound for democratization, become despondent as they see that history goes from bad to worse, or feel defeated that it repeats itself. Even though the authors of such observations do not necessarily consult archival documents in producing historical narratives, the very condition of their plausibility is an effect of the institution of the archive.

The institutional history that underwrites most written histories, including critical ones, is a frightening and neglected aspect of imperialism. It is scary not only because it shapes the content of specific narratives, but also because it impacts people’s capacity to interact with one another without affirming the world created by institutional violence. Institutional narratives are constantly produced by everybody—scholars, artists, and laymen alike—and their plurality and endless revisions downplay the role their institutional structure plays in naturalizing imperial crimes. Against the presumed neutrality of the time line and its seeming openness to revisions and inclusions, foregrounding the incompatibility of diverse patterns of archiving communal knowledge is necessary for undoing the transcendental quality of the time line. Incompatible temporal patterns had to be destroyed for the regime of imperial archive to take over.

Since these patterns were often inscribed in or performed through different objects such as the Inca quipu (which consists of strings and knots in which information is stored), their extraction from communities and their subsequent collection and preservation in museums was one common way to destroy these patterns, designated thus as old forms, and with them the systems of rights and protection of members of the communities of which they were part (see Fig. 3.2). They were replaced with imperial time lines, that exist for the self-preservation of the archival regime through the distribution and reproduction of inequality in access, rights, health, wealth, care, and sustenance.

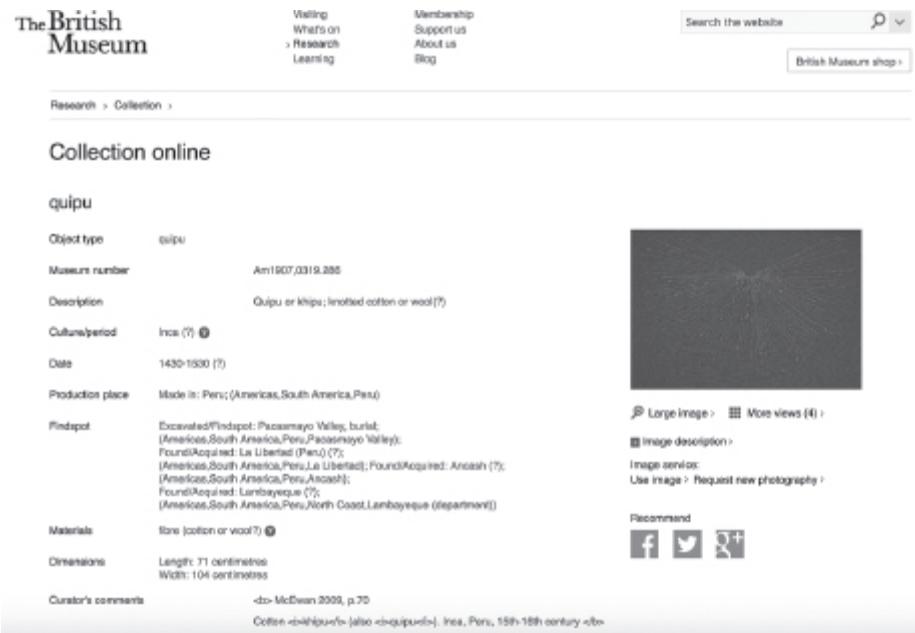


Fig. 3.2

To Institute, to Violate

I propose to differentiate between the *institution* of the archive, the *regime* of the archive, and *archival practices*. The archive is not only an institution, and the institution does not only consist of past documents that it is tasked with preserving. The archive is first and foremost a regime that facilitates uprooting, deportation, coercion, and enslavement, as well as the looting of wealth, resources, and labor. The regime of the archive, though, also consists of practices that are irreducible to the administration of already produced documents and includes a variety of ruling technologies with and through papers. The fantasy of paper-based world history and the emergence of “historical value” as a major excuse for the accumulation of others’ worlds, which is materialized in the archive as institution, cannot be understood independently of the archival regime and subsequent practices. Portions of people’s living worlds were declared valuable pieces of history and could be appropriated, owned, processed, sealed under a particular meaning, and placed alongside other chunks in a way that “owning history” became the source of authorization for owning more. History is made into the imperial regime’s source of authority.

The archive is studied mainly as an institution, often without asking what an institution is or what *to institute* means. *To institute* (from the Latin *institutus*) is to put something in motion, as well as to establish, to found, and to put in place an establishment authorized to set the norm for a certain

activity. Even when these two definitions are combined (that is, when *to institute* is defined as “to put something in motion toward its establishment”), the meaning is still too weak to capture the mode of operation of imperial institutions.

This should be refuted; imperial institutions do not put something in motion, and their foundation is not the beginning of something new. Imperial institutions rather seek to put an end to existing activities, formations, and structures. They seek to impose their own principles and structures as the foundation of transcendental forms that have no history other than their concrete instantiations. Hence, in the context of imperialism, rather than relying on common dictionary definitions of the verb *institute*—starting something new, putting something in motion—I use a different verb, *violate*, which captures with greater accuracy the constitutive irreverence and disrespect of imperial institutions toward what exists, toward that which it shreds through endless devices into collectible pieces that can be processed through further devices. The verb *violate* is not foreign to the discourse of institutions, but rarely if ever refers to institutions’ mode of operation; rather, it refers to those who refuse to be complicit in its violence or recognize its authority. Imperial institutions violate peoples’ right to preserve their worlds and pursue their activities, and by doing so they authorize themselves to declare those people “violators” while exonerating themselves of responsibility and accountability for their deeds against them.

The archive enables the relegation of this violence to a past for which it acts as a guardian. It is this bygone time that the archive seeks to achieve; this is its unstated mission, its project, its goal.

The Archival Regime of Classification

An archive is irreducible to a walled place; rather, it is a regime that consists of a set of practices materialized in papers. The archive as the realm of documents handled by experts, in which the governed are occasionally its external and secondary users, is yet another imperial epic. In this fable, the power of experts to command, produce, and preserve documents is by definition greater than that of the majority of people who were forced to act as archivists and on whose labor the archive relies. Archival practices in the broader sense that I depict here are antecedent to imperial archives, such that it would be impossible, incorrect, and redundant to understand the limited archival practices that pertain to the administration of documents as the imperial archive’s genealogical precursor.⁸ The masquerading of the archive as a collection of documents is at the basis of the conflation of ontological violence with epistemological violence. The regime of the archive shapes a world, not just distorts the ways it is perceived (its representations).

Studying these practices and places as part of a regime will help to identify the particular forms of violence that the archive operates, contains, tames, standardizes, and regulates and its role in the reproduction of the imperial condition. Outside of the regime of the archive, some of these practices would be perceived as sheer violence. Could we tolerate the transformation of people into embodiments of classificatory categories such as “undocumented,” “asylum seeker,” “refugee,” “citizen,” or “illegal worker” if the archive had not persuaded us that it is an accurate reflection of who they are?

The materialization of violence on bodies, objects, and environments is the inaugural imperial archival act. From the moment a person is born, a record of who this person “is” is ready to be inscribed in a document that will affirm his or her identity within a particular taxonomy. However, the omnipresence of the imperial regime of the archive should not let us forget two things: (a) that people never fully embody imperial categories, rendering the regime less solid than it often seems to be; and (b) given that people cannot be reduced to such categories, though their transformation into their embodiments may seem to have been achieved in one place, it can never be assumed as a solid basis for the progression to “the next stage” in a fable of imperial progress.

Given that people are constantly engaged, willingly or not, with archival activity, it becomes clear that the archive was never the territory of its assumed guardians. From the system of *encomienda* to the regime of enslavement, examples of the way in which people were differentiated abound, starting with those members who were endowed with the power of collecting, documenting, and processing information about others, matching these records to concrete people differentiated into “populations”—women, young men, old—capable of different tasks and exposed to different forms of exploitation.⁹ The produced archival records were exchanged as part of a claim to power over the differentially governed. Through the processes that force people to live out their categorical allocations, communities were no longer what they used to be. Today, it is even hard to envisage the existence of individuals *not* as archival records, walking files of themselves. Those endowed with authority, from the *Visitadores* under the Spanish conquest to the professional archivists today, act as if these “records” were their monopoly and they are their guardians, thus denying the long-lasting, forced investment of entire populations in archival activities.

Classifying living beings and ordering them in hierarchical arrangement was not particular to imperialism, nor was it a new practice. Aristotle’s taxonomy of 500 species—*scala naturae* (“ladder of life”)—is one famous early example. However, the imperial system of classification cannot be studied as its offspring. Imperial taxonomy originated in the destruction and denial of previous systems of classification that it replaced with the incessant impulse to reclassify everything.

Everything and everyone must have its precise place in endless lists, indexes, compendiums, and repertoires. Such a place *in the archive* is meant to supersede people's place *in a world* previously shared with others. The replacement of each and every element of local cultures was pervasive to the point that "even the traditional political system was made to appear as a Portuguese creation."¹⁰ Chancellor Williams describes how the Portuguese imposed an inferior status on blacks: "cutting their roots with the past and thereby losing the very links with their history from which people draw strength and inspiration to move forward to even higher ground and, in fact, the reason of being," the Portuguese succeeded in imposing on blacks an "inferior status."¹¹

Christopher Columbus's letters provide an early written record of this taxonomic violence, conducted as a crusade: "In every land to which your Highnesses' ships sail, I have a tall cross erected on each cape, and I proclaim your Highnesses' greatness to all the people."¹² Though completely aware that the places he visits are inhabited, cultivated, had names, and were shaped by the local populations ("many people then came to us and told us that the name of this land was 'Paria'"), Columbus continues to name those places with Spanish names: "a cape which I called La Galea. I had already called the island Trinidad." Amidst the natives whom he encounters he sees potential informants who could reveal the locations of natural resources: "I tried hard to discover where they found these pearls"; he classifies and ranks their places according to their potential to enrich him and Spain: "Although no great cargoes have arrived, enough samples of gold and other valuables have been sent back to prove that great profit will very shortly accrue from these lands"; and his journey is conceived as an enterprise of progress that should not be stopped: "May it please Our Lord to forgive the persons who have libeled and do libel this noble enterprise and who have opposed its progress without considering what honor and glory it brings to your royal estate throughout the world."

What we see here is the kernel of imperialism's archival modus operandi: existing forms of being-together and of inhabiting the world are violated through the separation of objects from people and their transformation into embodiments of foreign classificatory categories that determine their fate of displacement, extermination, exploitation, appropriation, or preservation. These are archival practices par excellence that are not confined to the walled institution of the archive and do not have their origin with its establishment. Not only were such operations perpetrated in the open and in public, they also shaped and organized the structure and nature of the public sphere. The imperial regime of the archive was never confined to the shadows, nor was it limited to paper documents.

That old papers and drawers stand for the aesthetics of the archive is the effect of the separation between archival documents and archival practices of ruling. This kind of separation, which also

recurs in the separation between art objects and museal practices, is crucial for the materialization of the imperial condition. Thus, the paradigmatic resemblance between documents and objects—both their separation from people and from the practices that administer them—can be denied and overshadowed by what is imposed as their fundamental difference through the respective institutions created to take care of them: namely, archives and museums. When the archive is reduced to “its aesthetics,” the role archival practices played in the birth and institutionalization of modern art as a coherent and undisputed field with its own history and evolution is thus completely eclipsed. The meticulous archival documentation of art objects within museums is not operated with an eye to transforming them into archival records; on the contrary, it is operated in order to reinstitute the imperial difference between document and object, to assert the undeniable weight of archival documents in writing history, and to ground the status of archival procedures as neutral and external to the production of objects as art.

The undisputed existence of these two institutions—archive and museum—is predicated on the destruction of existing worlds, which could not have been pursued if the separation between people and their objects, and between people and their world, had not already been institutionalized. Referring to the destruction of numerous images by Affonso, the king of Congo, as part of the process of Congo’s conversion to Christianity, Leon Kochnitzky laments Fra Duarte Lopez’s archival failure:¹³ “It is sad to think,” Kochnitzky wrote in 1952, that Lopez was present at the destruction of these statues without having the thought to describe them.”¹⁴ Salvation was made into an end in itself, advocated by experts and connoisseurs who lament failures to salvage, while the destruction, deportation, and enslavement that often amount to sociocide and culturicide are rarely mentioned except as proof that the capacity for producing art is already extinct among this or that group of people.

This imperial violation of people’s taxonomies (often devalued as missing standards and systematicity, values, rules, or habits) is not particular to an individual actor or to one institution—it is embedded in imperial institutions and the forms of knowledge production that they enable. Each time the shutter blades are opened and closed, resistance is fractured, oppressed, repressed, so that the operation of the shutter seems as natural as the law of gravity, and decades are required for its reversal to seem possible. Let me illustrate this tension with two moments. In the first, focusing on an African American Presbyterian missionary, we can track his attempt to reconcile his scripted missionary role with an attachment to Africa as part of his heritage. The second is the uncoordinated historical synchrony between two experts in art who were active in Germany and the United States, who operated the imperial shutters that define what art is.

Shortly after the “Free State” of Congo was proclaimed and Léopold II’s death factory inaugurated, Lukenga, the local king of Kuba, declared the territory under his rule a “forbidden country” to protect it from invaders. After spending a few months learning the language of the Kuba people, in 1892 William Sheppard, an African American Presbyterian, went to Congo and decided to reach the “forbidden country.”

Preparing his men for this journey, Sheppard warned them: “The king [Lukenga] had sent word throughout the land that we could not enter his country.”¹⁵ The king was known for not letting foreigners in and for his edict threatening to behead any of his people who assisted foreigners in entering. Aware of Sheppard’s persistent presence on the outskirts of the forbidden territory, King Lukenga sent his son after him. When the son learned that Sheppard knew their language, he decided to first report this to his father, who ended up inviting Sheppard into his kingdom. When Sheppard encountered King Lukenga, he asked for “full permission” to tell his people about God, the Great King. “Instead of asking questions about this King, as I really supposed he would do,” Sheppard describes Lukenga’s response to his request, he “leaned toward me, smiled and said: ‘It’s all right; you can tell it everywhere, but you cannot leave the capital; you must stay here’.”¹⁶ From this story, we can infer that the king’s protection of his kingdom was not out of fear of contact with foreigners, nor out of the introduction of different ideas, beliefs, or goods. Rather, he asked Sheppard to stay in the city to avoid the familiar colonial plight of foreigners acting as if they are authorized to impose new rules and taxonomies on the local community they have just penetrated. Imperial interventions were seldom about joining a given community as an equal member. Rather, they happened through the subjugation of people to a new taxonomy in which imperial actors granted themselves authorization to smash existing beliefs, habits, and rules and to replace them with totally different structures.

The second moment took place in 1915, when hundreds of thousands of African sculptures were already populating Western institutions. Without knowing of one another’s work, both the German art historian Carl Einstein and the American photographer (and founder of Gallery 291) Alfred Stieglitz denuded African masks of various elements—raffia threads, pieces of textiles, iron pins and nails. Stieglitz and Einstein then presented these denuded masks to their audiences in their respective flourishing institutions of art (Stieglitz in his gallery, Einstein in his publications) as art objects per se. They were determined to persuade the world that these were not fetishes, idols, ethnographic objects, or magic devices (as they were conceived by other collectors). These objects, already detached from their complex material and spiritual worlds, went once again through a denuding. This was necessary in order to render them perfect candidates for recognition as “pure” works of art. They were

authenticated with archival records and stamped with the names and signatures of the photographers, dealers, curators, and art historians whose expertise was involved in this process and whose status as experts was equally shaped through it.

These items—at one and the same time documents and works of art—are crowded together for tax inspection before being hung on the museum's walls (see Fig. 3.3). The inspection will confirm that they are in compliance with law and order, thus ready to contribute to the orchestrated disavowal of the violation inherent in looting, isolating, and cleansing these objects in preparation for posing them on pedestals. Now, in their new museal dwelling, cleansed of all marks of use by their creators and communities, now considered to be noise and dirt superfluous to Western art authorities, catalogued with tags and numbers, they are protected by the museal archival inventory. Their reference is the clean photographic documents produced by renowned photographers such as Walker Evans, who, by capturing them in photographs, actually produce them a second time as archived objects in museums' collections, as "stylistically unique, unmistakably his [Evans's] creation."¹⁷ This particular mode of being of African sculptures, as museum and archive exhibits, became not just the dominant condition of their appearance but also their transcendental condition.



Fig. 3.3

Where and Who Are the Archive's Laborers?

Miraculously, even though the archive's *raison d'être* is to be a public institution, laborers and users, without whom the archive would be like a black box or a grave, are absent from its various definitions and accounts. They are made superfluous to its essence, and more importantly, their disappearance is unnoticed and is certainly not considered to be theoretically or politically scandalous. Indifference to the disappearance of the archive's laborers or users is another trait of imperialism. Even scholars, the

assiduous workers of the archives, are among its superfluous population, and symptomatically enough they often take an active and deliberate role in performing their own disappearance, removing the traces of their presence from the archive, while positing the archive as an external object for their consultation and reflection, trying to capture its hidden mechanisms of power and trying to conceive its essence. *Aufhebung*, in the Hegelian sense of the term, “provides us,” writes Cassar, “with an itinerary for theorizing the modality of the archive.”¹⁸ The “modality of the archive,” it is implied here, can be captured only once archive users are removed and the archive emerges, clear of people, as the thing in itself. As a shorthand for the mechanism of the archive, *Aufhebung* is a concept that sanctions time, space, and a body politic from a sovereign point of view. It is a unifocal-perspective concept, that is, one that erases the multiple experiences of users and subsumes them under a single cohesive perspective. It is a concept that pretends to be indispensable for orienting oneself in the common world, a concept that is supposed to be accessed and used by everyone in the same way. Using such a single-perspective concept to reflect upon and orient oneself within the archive, one inadvertently partakes in the effort of protecting the archive from citizens’ unruly manners, inaccurate uses, and careless treatment of documents always more precious than them. This keeps the archive as close as possible to its sovereign conception: modes of acting and interacting are not conceived as part of what the archive is. Given that the imperial condition is maintained through the regime of the archive, it is neither uncommon nor unlikely that even people for whom the archive emblematises dispossession continue to refer to it and try to find recourse in the sovereign conception of its mode of functioning, the very mode responsible for rendering their experience, exploitation, and aspirations irrelevant or ancillary. This is what imperial institutionalization seeks to achieve.

Abstracting people to the point of their evaporation from the scenes in which they are active is often the case with dictionarylike definitions of public institutions, something that professionals or experts, whose presence is more likely to be considered relevant, usually take for granted. The archive is envisaged as driven by the invisible hands of abstract guardians, independently of the actions of people whose lives were atomized into collectible records. This aspect of “acting by itself” in the pursuit of its document-preserving mission helps to create the impression that the archive was always there, that it is always already about the past enshrined in documents, and that the negation it sanctions—preservation and cancellation—is its poetic quality.

In a series of photographs taken in the *Archives Nationales* in Paris, the photographer Patrick Tournéboeuf moves with his camera from one hall to another in the old and new buildings, as if in the pursuit of *the* archive, its essence. His photographs capture the archives’ different halls as spaces devoid of human presence (see Fig. 3.4). The position from which the photographer took these photos

might have been affected by the physical and spatial arrangement of the archive's rooms, but the recurrence throughout the entire series of the same abstracted image of the archive is the aim of the project. In only one photograph is a human figure recorded, seated at a large table while consulting documents. The long exposure made the figure blurred, completely out of focus; the photographer, so it seems, didn't focus on her but, as it were, on the archive *itself*—cabinets, shelves, folders, documents. The superfluous presence of the sitting figure makes it ephemeral—a “spectre,” Derridians would say, an appellation that again erases, in a different way, the human presence—overshadowed by the solid and durable archive.¹⁹



Fig. 3.4

Such photographs could serve as a visual version of this unifocal-perspective concept of the archive, simultaneously capturing the archive as a detached entity and projecting its idea onto the physical archive. Yet, if we refrain from relating to photographs as representations, dictionarylike definitions of a sort, and rather interact with them as part of the event of photography, the photographer's efforts to achieve this unifocal-perspective of the archival complex become noticeable, and this perspective ceases to be the outcome of a casual snapshot, but rather a meticulously constructed representation of an abstracted archive. The photographer's efforts to squeeze the rows of long shelves into the frame, as if they are converging without human interruption into an infinite distance, start to be noticed. Rather than eliminating his toil from our interpretation of the photograph, we should see in it a confirmation that for the abstract archive to exist it has to be produced, and its production is cherished within the imperial regime.

A different type of photograph, this time populated with people, welcomes the visitor of the Zionist Archive's web page (see Fig. 3.5). The presence of people in this series of photos does not

change the common depiction of the archive as a documents-based institution. The photographed people are collecting, filing, and studying piles of documents. We do not have to see what these papers are or know anything about their provenance in order to recognize that we are indeed looking at an archive. No document seems out of reach or too high for these committed actors, as can be inferred from the presence of a ladder in site. Like industrious ants, they are sheltering, sorting, and putting them away to be carefully explored by others who will one day come to the archive for the study of the past. In this idyllic depiction, the archive is a shrine for the precious and cherished past frozen in documents.



Fig. 3.5

The documents, we are told, are safe in the archive. There is nothing especially disturbing about these images, which are typical representations of archivists as professional and dedicated individuals. Their familiarity with public international norms of care for documents should not surprise us. They may also be familiar with the language of the Israeli law (enacted in 1955) regulating archival activity, which repeats almost verbatim the words used almost two hundred years earlier by those who acted as the founders of the French national archives during the French Revolution and the formation of the French nation-state. Here is the Israeli Archives Law from 1955:

[The archive] will contain any archival material of official institutions previous to the founding of the State of Israel, and any archival material of a state institution or a local authority that is no longer in

existence and had not been replaced by any other institution, as well as any other material of a state institution or authority.²⁰

And here is the French National Assembly decree from September 12, 1790, proclaiming that the archive is a “deposit of all the acts which establish the constitution of the kingdom, its public right, its laws and its distribution in departments.”²¹

Such similar foundational acts, though separated by two hundred years, could be sewn together into an evolutionary history of the archive only as the existence of other formations is destroyed so that these imperial archives could instantiate one single transcendental form. Thus, the gaps in the still-hegemonic narrative of Western modernity could be sutured and former colonies could catch the train of modernity and its “race for rare documents.” When newly formed states create an archive of their own, their commitment to growth could be synchronized with the rest of the world: “Indeed, in the field of science and technology [*technique*], documentation is almost constantly renewed, in a very narrow time span.”²² The fact that many archives were institutionalized only recently does not impact this *sui generis* narrative of the archive as a discrete apparatus with its own history of progress through several centuries. Rather, the history of the archive is perceived as a necessary step in the unavoidable movement of modernization. With each new archive, imperialism is regenerated as the only possible political species, even though many others necessarily exist. Rather than being understood as actors in an imperial campaign to colonize existing modes of being together, local individuals in different places are made into imperial leaders of progress, representatives of their people, endowed with imperial power, knowledge, and recognition, ready to perpetrate the foundational acts of modernization, which threaten to annihilate the plurality of political species.

The imperial zero tolerance for existing political species is preserved through the attenuated, neutral language of universal procedures describing the archive’s mission, as in the Israeli Archive law: “[Documents] existing at any site with interest for research of the *past, the people, the state* or society, or that are linked to the memory or action of public figures.”²³ Israeli statesmen were not required to invent their procedures of acquisition. The double-pronged violence of expropriation-accumulation was already embedded in the professional archival procedures that they and the experts they nominated employed. Here is an example of the habitus of the expert, cleansed of any need to hide its imperial aspects, from a text written in the same year that the Israeli archive law was drafted by a French archivist reflecting on her profession:

Let us admire the documentary fertility of a simple originary fact: for example an antelope of a new kind has been encountered in Africa by an explorer who has succeeded in capturing an individual that is then brought back to Europe for our botanical garden [Jardin des Plantes].²⁴

The text goes on and on admiring the way the same antelope is made into an archival document, a museum object (stuffed and preserved), loaned, and recorded, thus making overwhelmingly obvious the imperial nature of the cohort of experts who are involved in making Africa the mine of the raw material of their profession.

Archive workers are the state's civil servants. Their appointment, as was already the case in France in the late eighteenth century, is a mark of excellence not only in dealing with documents but also in protecting the foundational principles of the regime. The universality of the category "any person" in the language of the law is driven by the principle of a body politic whose members are governed differentially:

Any person is allowed access to archived material, but this *right may be restricted by regulation* and the restriction might be respective of the type of archival material and given period of time since its creation [...] *The archivist* authorized by the commission may classify archival material as *confidential*—on grounds of posing a *hazard to state security* or *foreign relations*, and *clandestine*—on grounds of damage to individual privacy; the archivist *is permitted* by the council to do any of the above *on other grounds.*²⁵

"Any person" comes to mean any person who is recognized by the sovereign power as its subject and proxy, such as Jewish citizens in the case of Israel. The archive takes part in the identification of abstract and general concepts like "raisons d'état" and "state security," with respective groups of populations serving as their cause, their threat, or their representatives. In the case of the Zionist archives, it is not the security of the state as a universal form of organizing the governed which is at stake, but rather the security of the state as identified with one group acting as if it were exclusively a Jewish state. Over and above the state's secrets that are well-sheltered in the archive, carefully classified and stamped as "highly confidential," lay another, rather open secret that governed the archive's operation: that of differential accessibility, in which not the shared past but national identity determines one's access to the archive. Even though this segregation and dispossession is openly known, it is kept as a "secret," whose preservation as well as disclosure is another opportunity to ground the differential principle under which people are ruled.

Restrictions on citizens' access to documents, which became the hallmark of the violence of state archives, eclipse the denial of access to noncitizens and came to define the goal of civil struggle—gaining (more) access to what is enclosed behind the threshold of the archive, as if this is the core of the violence of the archive. Thus, when hundreds of photos of torture in Abu Ghraib were made public, the focus of civil struggle was to release more photos, as if what is in those released was not

enough to incriminate the system under which they could be produced, and as if the privileged access already given to citizens should be extended rather than being questioned and problematized as a symptom of the differential body politic sustained by and through the archive. Subsequently, the pitfalls of the archive as a regime that gained invasive access to people's lives, and as the institution that provides what is assumed to be the essential material for historical research (let alone an excess of access) are thrown out of focus. When restrictions are distributed differentially, they define access as a positive value, a privilege to embrace and to identify with and an achievement with respect to power. Thus, those who benefit from an excess of access while others are denied access are lured into denouncing what they read in archived documents rather than contesting the value of these documents as the ultimate source of exposing the regime's violence. They have become confidants.

A race for documentation is pursued for its own sake, as yet another aspect of the unstoppable imperial movement. At different moments within the history of the last centuries, it is accelerated through triumphant projects of "improvement" of access to documents of which the digital humanity enterprise is exemplary—centralization of collections; standardization of their format, size, and structure; amelioration of the means of their reproduction or the tools of indexation.

The question of accessibility plays a crucial role in switching focus from the crimes of the archive as producer of documents to modes of handling already existing documents. Archival accessibility, like other procedures for handling documents, is a process of learning to accept the imperial claim to neutrality. Citizens may be familiar with some factual details regarding looted material that they consult in the archive, but they are socialized, through the archive, to relate to this knowledge as secondary in their archival journey, based on their privileged access to documents, objects, and files classified in specialized places as "national treasures" or "patrimony." Rarely are they called upon to account for that wrong.

Not the Past, but the Commons

One of the challenges of this chapter is to question the identification of the archive with the past and the archive's declared role as the past's guardian. The archive lends the past a palpability that makes probing it all the more difficult. How can we question what is reaffirmed through the dates on the documents, the type of paper, the ink, their order, the signs of aging, the crumbling paper in the researcher's hands, the smell of old glue, the carts of boxes and files, the way they are indexed? Because it can be touched, it feels true; but this is part of the archive's ontology.

And if there was no past? And if the past was the invention of the imperial archive? And if the keepers at its gate are guarding something else? That none of these questions are pertinent to the study of the archive testifies to how very difficult it is to study its ontology. Imperial agents' annihilation of political species and modes of life, and the confinement of their acts of deportation and incarceration to a delineated space called "the past," were all necessary in order for the imperial enterprise to materialize as a condition of political life. The archive makes the condition palpable. It is a graveyard of political life that insists that time is a linear temporality: again, an imperial tautology.

Though we know very little about how many species of political formations had to be annihilated when the archival regime was substituted for them, we must assume their existence in order to perceive imperialism as reversible. Regardless of the proper or general names such species had or were given later, or the names that were erased with the annihilated species, before the half-millennia of imperialism, people shared worlds under singular forms of organizations, rules, nomenclature, ceremonies, objects, and temporal and spatial configurations. The body politic of which they were a part gave shape to the political regimes under which they lived. Studying the history of imperial destruction from what is in the documents preserved in archives aids in keeping the destruction of diverse and incompatible political formations and forms repressed and unnoticed. What do we know, for example, about the political formations of the destroyed communities in the Indies, described by Bartolomé de Las Casas, beyond the detailed cruelty of the Spanish against them and the characteristics given to them by their conquerors ("the least able to withstand hard labor," "those who possess the fewest temporal goods," "never ambitious," "never covetous")?²⁶ After all, the 10 or 12 million people who were slaughtered did have their own different patterns of political behaviors, regularities, and formations. Curiously, these complex political species did not pique interest as competing political modalities that could be explored. These other formations are assumed to be either nonexistent or necessarily obsolete to "modern politics."

Rather than reading the little that is present in the archive about those "extinct" political species—often buried in records of the creation of the new, in documents of what was once and is no longer—only as proof of their destruction, potential history reads records of destruction as proof of persistence and right to survive.

This identification of the archive with the past dooms what is in it to a set of abstract and neutral laws, regulations, and practices and thereby outlaws all other sets of laws, regulations, or practices that were in use. Whoever resisted being properly archivable along a linear time line under established categories became a violator of the already accomplished past, and thus, the present. The violence involved in the imposition of imperial power is rendered past and hence nonnegotiable. If

there is any sense in working with the common definition of the archive as a composite of “putting away” and “sheltering,” it is not as a predicate of how the archive works by itself, but rather of how the imperial gesture is performed.

Historians, as experts of the past, came later and were grounded in the institution, only after archival practices had distributed political roles and wealth. They were interpellated to account for political life as it was already mediated through the regime of the archive. Unsurprisingly, for a long time historians were unable to integrate “people’s history” into their narratives, and in order to do so they had to break with what their profession helped to fortify—the imperial phenomenal field. History as a profession was based on reading outrageous accounts of human trafficking or fatal enslavement as chronicles of past times and on shaping national and imperial narratives in dialogue with their predecessors in such a way that the same nomenclature of disavowal was used time and time again, thus continuing to abet the reproduction of that nomenclature. When historians, for example, choose to question the professional expectation of them to work hard at unearthing what by definition the archive’s mission is made to conceal, and when they prefer to privilege sources other than those classified in archives, they are reminded that their choices are wrong and that such choices affect the credibility of their research: for example, “that Du Bois did not work the archives would constitute one of the gravest criticisms by professional historians of *Black Reconstruction*.²⁷ Paradoxically, this internal disciplinary discourse is considered an assumption even in historical accounts that seek to write about what has been ignored.

In a recent account of the opening of British archival records on slavery, for example, David Olusoga compares the explosive potential of this collection of documents to the effect created today by documents from WikiLeaks:

The T71 files consist of 1,631 volumes of leather-bound ledgers and neatly tied bundles of letters that have lain in the archives for 180 years, for the most part unexamined. They are the records and the correspondence of the Slave Compensation Commission.²⁸

The core of the scandal cannot be in these unrevealed documents. Nothing in these documents would be more scandalous than that which is already known about the enslavement of Africans. It is only within the closed circuit of citizens for whom the “past” is *in* the archive that documents with details on enslavement can today provoke an unheard-of scandal. Unlearning this paradigmatic interpellation of the archive means stepping back from the inclination to unearth secrets from the archive of

catastrophes perpetrated in the open, disengaging from the position of the explorer–historian, and instead engaging in a present continuous mode with those considered “past.” It means acting on the belief that what they sought to protect is not over.

The Pitfalls of the “Alternative” Approach

The contention that the archive is not about the past but about the commons requires a different genre of narrative than the one known as history. The genre of history interpellates authors to conceive of the relationship between their work and that of their predecessors as evolving along a temporal axis. Whoever is critical toward the imperial archive must provide an alternative history, as if one’s predecessors could not be allies in a common struggle. Thus, the archive is preserved as a cohesive institution immune from those who interact with it, necessarily external to it. Personal experiences, emotions, and affects; the use of imagination and inventiveness; and in general a critical approach to the archive are considered part of the flourishing field of alternative and counterhistories; they cannot be assumed to be new.

Arguing that a new anthology of essays on the archive challenges “the *tired* assumption that an archive is simply an immutable, neutral, and ahistorical place in which historical records are preserved,” its editors have to adhere to the order of disciplinary genealogies and forget the rage that archives provoked among those who resisted the dissection of their world into archives.²⁹ This raises a cluster of questions: What are these new approaches countering, exactly? In what sense are they new? Why do their authors assume that others before them, those who entered archives or were left outside of them, did not feel rage or envy, distress or pleasure, in their interaction with the archive? What leads scholars to so often believe that prior to their discoveries, people viewed the archive as a serene institution, consistent and coherent, and that they are the first to deconstruct it? And if, on the other hand, one already knows that the archive has never been a serene and equitable site for preserving documents and storing them away, why is one seduced into beginning the archive’s alternative history by projecting onto it an integrity and coherency that it never had, in order to criticize and deconstruct it in the contemporary moment? What prevents critical scholars from acknowledging former challenges to the hegemonic forces working in and with the archive and from continuing the transgressive work begun by their predecessors? What is it that continues to provoke this drive for an alternative account as if for the first time and that leads scholars to associate the archive with a certain homogeneity? Is it the archive or its idea? Is it our predecessors’ actions and accounts that provoke and justify the engagement with alternative history or is it our contemporaries,

who perpetuate oppressive options and maintain the archival cohesiveness that justifies it? And why does alternative history adopt a structure of temporal progress that invalidates precedents and predecessors rather than adopting a structure of ongoing and continuous struggle between competing incompatible principles?

The Archive Is People

The archive's modality seems to set it apart from people. But people were always there, doomed to be included in the archival regime, struggling against their transformation into archival records, interacting with others who deprived them of access to the archive and confiscated their documents for preservation in a centralized archive. Enraged, some of them acted in response to oppression, others complied, and others rebelled secretly when they were unable to revolt publicly, conspiring against measures that forced them to obey commands issued by mighty agents of public institutions; some at times even went mad when they realized that others had stripped them of their power through the archive, or died in sorrow.³⁰ Whenever we read about mass deportation or internal displacement of people, we cannot let go of accounts that ignore their affective responses to their detachment from what they kept, arranged, and organized as meaningful in one way or another. No matter how many such accounts exist in the archive, we have to presume that they are only a small minority of those whose worlds were destroyed.

In October 1789, on the famous march of thousands of revolutionary women to Versailles to request that the king intervene in the goings-on in Paris, the women stopped by the Hôtel de Ville to look for arms and destroy papers. "They wanted to destroy the heaps of papers," writes John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton in his 1910 account of the French Revolution, "as all that writing did them no good."³¹ Feminist histories of the French Revolution report and praise the women's success in compelling the king to move his seat from Versailles to Paris. Yet this vignette is still absent from histories of the creation of archives during the French Revolution. When such actions of people raging against the accumulation of papers used against them are included in such histories, it is often with a mourning tone regarding the loss of precious papers.³² One must recall that the Hôtel de Ville was not designed as an archive (no other buildings embody this function anyhow), but in the eyes of the governed population as expressed by those women, the seat of the Municipal Government of Paris is necessarily also the seat of both ammunition and papers—that is, the seat of power. These papers,

as Acton described and as these women knew, “did them no good.” After all, the Bastille was attacked not for the few prisoners that were incarcerated in it, but for those papers—*lettres de cachet*—that sealed people’s fate.

In the margins of this famous story of the women’s march to Versailles are more examples of the women’s commons-based archival practice and wisdom. The National Assembly, they announced, would be their next stop after the Hôtel de Ville. They would go there “to find out everything that had been done and decreed until that day, the fifth of October.”³³ In this proclamation, the women expressed a clear right to all the papers relevant to the lives of the governed. Darline Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite mention briefly that after the king gave these women his promise to provide bread, they demanded the “King’s commitment in writing.” Papers, as we have seen, did them no good. But they knew that the absence of papers would not do them any good either.³⁴

These women were not the only ones who responded to papers accumulated in the hands of governing powers with actions that sought to refuse their privatization and concealment and who refused to passively accept its regulations as finalities. Not all the seigneurs or ministers who, in the first decades of the seventeenth century, volunteered to comply with the French king’s new state system and were required to submit their papers, did so without revolting.³⁵ Each of them probably had his own thoughts and story to tell about the archive. Not being used to seeing the archive as the coherent institution and neutral arbiter that the king determined that from now on it was to be, during their negotiations with the king some of these seigneurs and ministers concealed some of their papers from him. Such refusal or reluctance to comply with orders, laws, and programs of “aggressively soliciting material” are not exceptional to the French context. For example, nothing came out of the April 28, 1810, law that provided for a federal archive; Elizabeth Dow quotes Ernst Posner’s description of the “fire, loss and deliberate destruction” of archival holdings of the Federal Government.³⁶ We must approach the archive in the company of these women, these ministers, and all those who set fire, smuggled, or concealed documents, in unorchestrated attempts to stand in the way of the governing technology that claimed to be a neutral container and arbiter for diverse papers. With the invention of the past, the imperial archive destroys the commons and administers what is left of it as private ownership.

Understanding the limits of their power regarding the king’s decision and his rejection of their complaints, we should not assume that his officers embraced the dictate and immediately shared his vision of an institution that did not yet exist. We may assume that cunning, deception, and defiance

complicated people's compliance with the king's decisions. Their emotions and sentiments, drives and dreams, and modes of classification and prioritization are all part of the interaction, even though their power to act on their demands was limited.

The experience that former generations had with archives and archival procedures was no less variegated than ours. Some became part of its official cohort of professionals; others acted as a certain class of vernacular archivists working on their own collections of documents or objects; and yet still others were compelled, ordered, or were themselves drawn to use its services in order to supply the documents necessary to prove who they were, where they are allowed to go, or what they owned. Favier points to the mid-seventeenth century as the turning point in archival formation, as archives developed into institutions in possession not only of documents generated by state agents but of documents concerning the state and representing a public interest.³⁷ The consequences of this shift go beyond what Favier accounts for. The archive became a locus of historical progress, not its byproduct. In this way, it was incorporated in imperial and colonial practices and imaginaries that promoted detachment, standardization, perpetual movement, external and superior goals, and investment in the future, the parcelling out of time and mastering of time's fictive unity.

Archival Procedures

At no moment in its modern history did the archive resemble its dictionarylike definition.

Preservation? The drive to preserve documents, often associated with the French Revolution, emerged together with the drive to displace, destroy, and re-use them for other purposes, from recycling papers to preparing ammunition.³⁸ But even at the point when ammunition no longer requires papers, today “government archives keep only about 2.5–3 percent of potential archival material; they destroy the rest.”³⁹

Preserving documents? The archive does not preserve endangered documents as much as create documents as objects of preservation. This requires the destruction or discarding of others as not worthy of preservation. Papers are thus extracted from their environment and exposed to certain procedures of recording, classifying, indexing, and filing that render them into documents.⁴⁰ Their nature and use has changed.

Appointment and skills? Both destruction and preservation, in and of the archive, were met with resistance by the many who were supposed to execute the tasks. Archivists were not always appointed by the state or by private collectors; there have been many self-appointed archivists. The required skills expected from an archivist were invented and developed to fit the political praxis of their

operation. Since the beginning, they included tasks of elimination, recycling, and robbing, alongside protection and shielding. Looting, theft, and appropriation were not external to the archive, and people were enraged when orders and procedures deprived them of what they considered their own papers—as were the revolutionary women of France who stormed the Hôtel de Ville.

Custodians of the past? Documents were not first preserved as relics from the “past” but as proof of power and status mobilized against others in the present, and archives were not motivated by custody as much as ownership and the market it enables. Archives, similar to museums, became the storage of market value in which the trade flourishes by extracting certain types of objects—documents—from market circulation. The annual market of documents sold in auctions is estimated at \$50 million for only 5,000–8,000 items.⁴¹

Accessibility to the public? Yes, but not everywhere, not all archives, and not always. For example, the ceremonial French declaration dated from June 25, 1794, provided citizens with free access to state archives, a right that only materialized in 1847 with the installation of a reading room on the ground floor of the National Archives in the Hôtel de Soubise in Paris.

Nonimperial Grammar, Not Alternative Histories

The discovery *for the first time* of the violence of the archive, its manipulations, silences and absences, is predicated on the denial of the presence of others in the archive. It is as if, regardless of what one already knows about the history and functioning of the archive and similar institutions and people’s experience with them, scholars are trapped in the grips of the power of its abstract idea. They are interpellated to look at it through a lens that positions them outside of its configuration and enables them, through its study, to emerge with a new alternative critical history, which breeds the modest joy of revelation and a kind of temporary liberation from the imperial condition.

Alternative history is usually conceived of in terms of binaries, and these are often projected onto a temporal axis in a way that renders the alternative narrative more progressive than those made earlier and more relevant to the contemporary. It also renders those who struggle against the archive as victims to be salvaged from the archive rather than as allies in a common struggle. It may be that only now, after a few decades of writing explicitly critical and alternative histories, can the unpremeditated aspects of this approach to time and the role historians inadvertently played in reifying the imperial imagination be grasped and studied.

Imperial archives, as such histories seek to show, were not born as solid, coherent, and functioning institutions devoted to the neutral preservation of *the past*. Even today, their realities

always exceed their coherent representations in alternative histories. Those of us who write about archives today are in one way or another imperial citizens by birth, native speakers of imperial dialects that we had to unlearn if we wanted to speak in nonimperial grammars. Nonimperial grammar, shared with others, is essential for such dialect not to be heard as scattered cries in an alienated world but as truth claims about stolen shared worlds. Given that opportunities to speak nonimperial dialects with others, in public spaces, are limited—confined to protest sites and strikes—it is not surprising that when scholars find themselves alone in their separate desks, they tend to relate more to successive histories written by single authors constantly improving their predecessors' narratives.

Rather than writing alternative histories to what disciplinary predecessors wrote and have “not gone far enough in addressing,” a potential history of the archive is an attempt to undo imperial disciplinary grammar and foregrounds its incompatibility with nonimperial grammars. Nonimperial grammar cannot be invented—it can only be practiced through unlearning the imperial one. Even if nonimperial dialects of dis/engaging with/from archives are not victorious, they are enduring dialects and not inventions by individuals who could go “far enough.” Their grammar is founded on the assumption that the imperial archive cannot be described from an external or a posteriori position, as long as who we are—citizens or undocumented—is defined and regulated by the archive.

Even in the nineteenth century, when archives were associated with positivistic science, they were approached and perceived this way only within very limited circles. Indigenous peoples, chartists, freedmen and freedwomen, slaves, communards, anarchists, activists, and many social actors and writers in the nineteenth century were engaged in diverse archiving practices and didn’t recognize the archive’s claim to objectivity or the power of positivist history. Objectivity did not play a significant role in the different battlefields in which they were engaged. For these different actors, the archive was not about writing history and therefore was not about the past. They founded journals, composed educational agendas, wrote manifestos, fabricated papers, reclaimed their lands, published stories and histories, initiated social projects, became activists and revolutionaries, and sought other modes of inscriptions and representation. There is justification for mentioning such different actors together, because they share one trait: none recognized the authority of the imperial archives, either by opposing them or avoiding them. Listen to Audra Simpson. “How, then,” she asks,

do those who are targeted for elimination, those who have had their land stolen from them, their bodies and their cultures worked on to be made into something else articulate their politics? How can one

articulate political projects if one has been offered a half-life of civilization in exchange for land? These people have preexisting political traditions to draw from—so how do they, then, do things? They refuse to consent to the apparatuses of the state.⁴²

And the way her scholarship refrains from archiving their politics: “In time with that, I refused then, and still do now, to tell the internal story of their struggle. But I consent to telling the story of their constraint.”⁴³ These different modes of engagement with the archive—opposition, avoidance, disengagement—undermined many of the positivistic assumptions about the archive that recur in its alternative histories. Having read numerous alternative histories (some of which are recalled in this book) and written some such histories myself (in fact, this book started as a series of studies in alternative history of sovereignty, revolutions, human rights, or Israel–Palestine), I’m concerned here with a twofold question. On the one hand, why is the archive’s claim to objectivity or neutrality, even though it cannot be sustained, quoted time and time again in alternative histories in order to be refuted time and time again? On the other hand, why are different modalities of engagement with the archive kept apart from the archive, as if its essence is immune to them?

Not Predecessors but Rather Present Actors

Archives, both those I am using or refuse to use, and those I have created, have played a pivotal role in enabling alternative histories, but also in realizing that something is wrong with the paradigm of alternative history. The problem is that it proposes some things as “hidden histories” in need of discovery, but in fact, these aren’t hidden things or histories but rather open secrets known far beyond the archive and the grammar invented as guardian of its orderly uses. I have noticed that often, soon after formulating what seemed to me a new, alternative, or critical perspective, I could use it to find precedents for this perspective. If a certain written story is an alternative to imperial premises, it cannot be new: it is always already known, and it is only its authors that had to unlearn its imperial version in order to utter it properly, that is, from the point of view of those who never accepted its imperial version as truth. If we accept, as Tuck and Yang write in their critique of decolonization as metaphor, that “settler perspectives and worldviews get to count as knowledge and research” and that “these perspectives—repackaged as data and findings—are activated in order to rationalize and maintain unfair social structures,” the task at hand cannot be to forever write alternative histories to settler worldviews.

The idea of archive as ur-form of the past also has an impact on the way imperial catastrophes are narrated. Common tropes like “bad days” or “dark times,” always implying previous or future better

times as well as narratives of deterioration and decline, are often repeated with respect to historical spectacles of violence, cruel regulations, and unjust laws. These can be refuted only if we equip ourselves with counter assumptions that unseat the archive from its position as the ultimate depository of accurate information about the commons. That genocides, expulsions, dispossessions, and enslavements were practiced since the beginning of the invention of the New World is not (and was never) a secret. When the archive is assumed as the major site whence knowledge can be reconstructed and confirmed, other modes of inscription are neglected. When it comes to imperial catastrophes, the function of the archive is to render all other sources of knowledge superfluous and irrelevant, so that the paper it stores will stay mute, too. Thus historians can read without reading the traces of crimes written in innumerable papers until they find the ultimate document in which a clear intention to commit a mass crime is written down. Similarly, histories of the imperial enterprise can continue to be written and disseminated with very little if any account of the organized crime it perpetrates, because the neutral political lexicon enables and promotes crime-free narratives. This lexicon conditions scholars to react in surprise and stupefaction when the same recurrent crimes are encountered today. This astonished response is more an indication of solid assumptions created by the archive through its attendant professions and orchestrated ignorance, denials, and imperviousness, and less an indication of the real degree of atrocity in the scale of crimes committed by imperial enterprise.

Neither the atrocious measures, nor the resistance to atrocities, nor the aspiration to promote other options are new. Our approach to the archive cannot be guided by the imperial desire to unearth unknown “hidden” moments. It should rather be driven by the conviction that other political species were and continue to be real options in our present. We should not seek to discover but to join with others. Unlearning the past guarded by the archive and recognizing the archive as the institution through which the imperial condition is maintained is necessary in order to be able to come together as allies with those who have been relegated to the past. When we insist on being with others across the triple imperial divide of time, space, and the body politic, the division between past and present ceases to be a neutral axiomatic and the unexpected is no longer such. We should not forget that this imperial temporality is neither neutral nor natural and hence should not accept and present alternative history as a fresh, new perspective on the past. These two pairs of oppositions—past/present and hegemonic/alternative—and their conflation in the genre of alternative histories are the products of an imperial logic, which led us to believe that those before us were somehow blind to its machinery of power, which we can see because we are endowed with the virtue of being critical, a virtue we have been granted because we are modern, always more modern than others. For a nonimperial “we” to be

pronounced, a shared commitment to confront and substitute imperial premises is needed, and this has little to do with whether the historian was active now or a decade or two centuries ago.

Our predecessors—be they scholars or those whose existence can be recovered through scholarship—are not less astute than us regarding the archive. When we encounter them in the archive, we should remind ourselves that they were and continue to be political actors and that their actions were not exceptional or unique. Rather, their actions are variations of a nonimperial position that should help us interpret our right to the archive, not in terms of access to classified documents but in terms of a different form of engagement with those others. Our joint efforts, across time, should be the sign that the imperial condition is reversible. Knowing the long-lasting evil perpetrated by imperialism, we should suspect that if we find ourselves “discovering” its violence for the first time, it means that we are already caught in one of its numerous traps. We have allies in the archive, even if they are often defeated in their mission, and, rather than confirming their relegation to the realm of history, we should engage with their deeds as political partners and not as objects of research.

Alternatives are not to be sought along this past–present axis, and they are not to be written as history that *a priori* frames our findings in the past. For alternatives to imperialism to exist, unlearning what is assumed to be a structural distance between actors—in time, space, and the body politic—is a distance in relation to which we are enticed, encouraged, impelled, and interpellated to introduce ourselves; it is a distance that transforms others from political actors into subjects or objects of alternative histories and deprives them and us of the common ground of a shared tradition. Powerful as the imperial enterprise is, even though its procedures brutalize the conditions under which people can engage with each other and the world, as long as people live they cannot be completely subsumed by the imperial condition.

Archival Acceptability

“Contemporary forms of imperial presence” as Ann L. Stoler describes them, have not disappeared. Imperial crimes persist everywhere “without termination” and continue to generate “uneven temporal sedimentations.”⁴⁴ The persistence of these crimes obliges us to be more prudent when embracing notions of discontinuity or calls like the one proposed by Joan Scott to engage in “effective history.” Inspired by Foucault, Scott argues that with discontinuity the “present is understood to have resulted from its break with the past,”⁴⁵ but with the same stroke, the lingering presence of the past is being disavowed or ignored.

Announcing a break in time cannot be a way to resist imperialism or leave its grips, for the proclamation of such breaks is an imperial strategy par excellence and plays a constitutive role in generating the disasters through which imperial power operates. What enables these disasters to be part of the imperial regime, at once one of its products and a mechanism of its reproduction, is a particular type of discontinuity generated by the pace of the shutter that opens and closes between tiny actions and gestures, making sure that the violence is almost always indiscernible and that the meaning of a disaster as a regime is constantly evaporating. This is made possible as, with the operation of the shutter, these actions reaffirm the imperial triple dividing lines and respect them, thus providing the necessary imperial condition for their indiscernibility as crimes. Hence, in its neutral form, discontinuity itself can counter only an equally neutral continuity. But there can be nothing neutral about the continuity of the worlds that imperial violence shatters, certainly not for those who inhabit them.

Undoing the indiscernibility of the violence these neutral forms enable requires a non-neutral interpretation of dividing lines based on a commitment to the reparations and restitution claims of those the archive doomed to destitution. Making violence discernible, distinguished from its acceptable archival forms, requires a political ontological break. This can be made possible only once those who were distanced by endless imperial shutters are brought close again. This cannot be obtained without insisting on going back, through as many shutters as required, until the plausibility of legal imperial crimes is made impossible and unthinkable. In other words, a political ontological break requires the presence of those whose removal and suppression was needed to sustain violence as the basis of the law. The legal systems that made crimes possible was built by the same imperial agents who built archives committed to the transformation of imperial violence into acceptable actions, so newborn imperial citizens would either partake in their normalization or will have to deliberately unlearn, again and individually, their acceptability.

The archive operates as a machine that steals time, primarily the time of the noncitizens whose actions it seeks to keep apart and prevent from possibly converging with the interactions of citizens. The “chronophagy,” as Mbembe calls it, is a “radical act because consuming the past makes it possible to be free from all debt.”⁴⁶

What exactly is this temporality of imperial crimes? It is the lack of termination, as Stoler argues, but also the lack of a determined origin, a discernible moment when a threshold is crossed and a decision to commit a crime is taken. Such a moment is made superfluous by the rhythm of the shutter that makes it so that these crimes have neither point of origin nor point of termination. The crimes can be reiterated and their operators may not realize that they are already committing a crime, since no

threshold had to be crossed that would make them aware that they are the perpetrators. Precedent and reiteration (especially if the reiteration has no locally specific traits but, rather, seems familiar from other parts of the world) attenuate the burden of the crimes upon the individuals called to commit them. Thus, for example, the trope of the “exceptionality” of the Holocaust, this paradigmatic manifestation of a discontinuity, has served not only to diminish parallel regime-made disasters before and after, but also to enable the recurrence of many of the crimes that they involved.⁴⁷

This pattern of recurrence is mediated by the archival acceptability of regime crimes preserved by the imperial shutter. Archival acceptability takes place when actions and deeds that are considered unacceptable for one group, as can be discerned from imperial legal and political writings and norms, are permitted against other groups of the governed. These actions and deeds are reiterated as part of a benign order or policy, thus effacing their criminality. Rather than looking in documents for the origin of such crimes or for an explicit intention to commit them, I propose to look for moments when their acceptability is questioned and for the mechanisms that are then mobilized to reconstitute their prior acceptability.

“Do we really have to expel? [...] What’s the point?” asks the young Jewish soldier in Palestine, the narrator in *Khirbet Khize*, a novella written by the Jewish writer S. Yizhar in 1949 depicting the ethnic cleansing of several Palestinian villages. This text is not considered an archival document but rather literature, fiction. However, given that it was written during the transfer of Palestinians, I propose to pay attention to what it inscribed in 1949 beyond the literary aspirations of its author and to reconstruct how the destruction of an entire country was made acceptable. In addition, the novella, as an archive, offers more than filed military orders can, for in the novel we encounter the military order filed together with deliberations of the soldiers charged with executing it. “Well,” replies another soldier, “that’s what it says in the operational order.”⁴⁸

The protagonist knows, as the entire novel makes clear, that expelling people from their homes is unacceptable, and he is not willing to take part in this operation. Being a soldier, instead of asking, “Do I really have to expel?” he uses the pronoun “we,” substituting his personal decision to commit the violent action, a crime, with a collective military operation. Archival acceptability provides the necessary conditions for individual cries to become a priori givens. Archival acceptability does not erase the doubts individuals have when they know that what they are about to commit is wrong; on the contrary, once resolved, the initial doubts are woven into this acceptability, comforting the consciences of the perpetrators.

“Massive shadows of things whose death yesterday was still unimaginable,” says the same narrator when he looks at the village they just destroyed.⁴⁹ Archival acceptability blurs the distinction

between what was imaginable and what was not, such that the individuals do not experience themselves as criminal subjects though their deed was a crime. In yet another incident in the same novel, another soldier replies impatiently to the narrator: “What are we doing to them? Are we killing them? We’re taking them to their side [...] There is no other place in the world where they’d have been treated as well as this.”⁵⁰ If the narrator had any doubts, he is able to disregard them when he recalls that there is actually nothing exceptional about what they have done. It was pure reiteration.

The archival acceptability of imperial and colonial crimes does not lie in the institutional form of this or that particular archive or in its embodiment in a particular building.⁵¹ Both form and embodiment are contingent upon the numerous archival procedures and operations that, like a shutter, separate imperial actions—outside of a concrete archive, outside of the building—and render them archivable. This identification of the archive with a building prevents us from identifying a variety of archival procedures, such as looting, classifying, and stealing time, which are conducted in the name of the archive and for its sake, as part of it. “Instituting imaginary,” the role Achille Mbembe associates with the archive, is not produced solely through these state-guarded buildings and institutions. The archivability of deeds, events, and happenings, and the possibility of their eventual retrieval, exceed the building and what is archived in it.

So much is always already known about imperial crimes that are conducted in the open and impact all members of a given community: victims, perpetrator-leaders, and perpetrator-citizens talk about these crimes and share their disturbing details in public and private spheres of life. The common antecedent knowledge lessens the emergence of evidence as incriminating.

Archival acceptability is the form violence takes as it is generated through imperial shutters. It entices people to act differently than they would have acted if the crimes did not benefit from a plausible acceptability. The violence of archival acceptability is powerful because it lures people to commit acts that in other circumstances would appear lucidly as the crimes of appropriation, looting, dispossession, deportation, and ethnic cleansing. The narrator in Yizhar’s novella describes time and again his efforts to resist, to question, to raise doubt, to refrain from committing what continuously struck him as a crime, and thus gives us a glimpse into how his superiors’ answers and, even more so, his fellows’ engagement compelled him to comply: “Now at last we’ve established some order in these parts!” He tries to assimilate the answers that he has just heard and make them his own, preparing to retrieve them casually and assertively, should he himself be asked. Failing time and time again to condition himself to provide the ready-fashioned answers, he becomes the subject of a striking conversion. “Something struck me like lightning,” he tells himself in a last effort to resist the archival acceptability of the series of crimes he committed: “All at once everything seemed to mean

something different, more precisely: exile. This was exile. This was what exile was like,” he continues. He describes that, even though “things were piling up inside me,” in dissonance with the meaning given to them, “there was nowhere to wander or to distance myself. I went down and mingled with them.”⁵²

When crimes are reiterated in the open, their archival acceptability cannot be found in secret folders or drawers of classified documents. Rather, it should be sought in open files and binders that hold information about the privileged population, those people not targeted directly by these crimes. One set of tags that function as an umbrella for archival acceptability, to which I’ll return later, is made of key political terms constitutive of the political technique that was used during decolonization to maintain the imperial condition: “self-determination,” “citizenship,” “defense,” “repatriation,” “nation-building,” and so on. These concepts are tools in the pursuit of imperial enterprises; never innocent, they are meant to create the reality they purport to capture objectively. Archival acceptability is generated when the circuit among the operations and their conceptualization is orchestrated so as to render any statement, symptom, or trace of these operations’ unacceptability negligent and “inconsequential,” to use Leela Gandhi’s term.⁵³

To the extent that unacceptable crimes remain objects of concern at all, as they are reiterated they continue to appear as somehow inevitable, justifiable, and the way things are, woven into the very fabric of democratic political regimes.

An Unshowable Photograph

Months after the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948, the deportation of Palestinians intensified (see Fig. 3.6). This image of a long procession of Palestinian women, elders, and children who are being led away from their country, while watched by many observers from the international community, is one further reiteration of the same violence. In 1949, many of the Palestinians were already uprooted, confined to transit localities where they were separated from Jews. These “Palestinian only” areas, as indicated in the captions, facilitated their later expulsion under the campaign of “repatriation.” Palestinians’ expulsion was part of the accepted performance of forced migration emerging from post-World War II Europe, tagged as “repatriation.”



Fig. 3.6

After the war, millions of nationals had to “return” to “their” countries, even though they had never lived in those countries. Forced migration as repatriation exemplifies the way political terms’ meanings have been and continue to be consolidated and shaped by the imperial condition. The meaning of *repatriation* as a corrective or reparative counteraction against a wrong or an evil—similar to actions such as restoration, rehabilitation, reestablishment, reclamation—is preserved. Repatriation could be used coercively against people by agents acting as liberators or peace keepers, since its meaning is rather defined by its antonym in the discourse of international law, *refoulement*, a term that is associated with harm. The nonrefoulement clause indicates that “(n)o state party shall expel, return (*refouler*) or extradite a person to another state where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.”⁵⁴ Since the “proper place” of people is defined by global imperial schemes, the repatriation of people to places to which others decide they belong continues to exist within archival acceptability and UN doctrine. Repatriation is the general name for a series of violent procedures conducted separately for the sake of bringing people and objects to their right place: sorting populations and separating men from women, elders from children, one nation or ethnic group from the other, uprooting people from their homes, appropriating their objects, destroying their fabric of life, displacing them from one place to another, destroying their familiar places, and obstructing their return.

Thus, the cleansing of Palestinians from Palestine could be pursued without concealment and captured by the cameras of several photographers and international delegates. The International Red Cross photographer, who captured this photo, did not report what he saw as a crime, but rather as a

“repatriation.” The caption reads: “Repatriation of 1,200 Arab civilians. 1949.”⁵⁵ Upon viewing the photograph in the ICRC archive, I recognized the women and children from a series of photographs taken by the Israeli photographer Beno Rotenberg. At the Israel State Archives, those photographs are classified by the photographer’s handwritten caption: “Arab women from Tantura going to Jordan.” This caption played a pivotal role in understanding that this expulsion was actually their second expulsion. Included in this category of “women” were elderly men and children; at this point, military-age men from Tantura had already been either incarcerated or massacred. At the moment when the ICRC photograph had been taken, they were no longer in Tantura, and their presence outside of their original town and the imposition of a Jewish sovereign nation-state in their homeland made them a superfluous population, extraneous to the people—the Jews—whose right to self-determination was internationally recognized. Repatriation, here, is an imperial mission that enables one people to realize their right to self-determination through the dispossession of others.

In the same photographic archive of the ICRC, I came across a photograph of an elegant elderly man, who became my companion (see [figure 3.7](#)). The photograph is captioned “Kfar Yona, Jewish front line. A former prisoner of war is interrogated in the presence of a delegate from the ICRC.” Even before examining the photograph more closely, knowing the circumstances of this expulsion, I knew that this man was not, and could not be, a prisoner of war. Since this expulsion was conducted under the aegis of the normative category of “repatriation,” contrary to many other operations of expulsion conducted in Palestine during the years 1948–49, this one was open to photographers and international organizations such as the ICRC.⁵⁶ At this particular expulsion, approximately 2,000 Palestinians of Arab origin—mostly women, children, and elderly people—were left with little choice but to sign papers proving that they had agreed to be evacuated to Jordan as part of “family reunification” (their relatives having already been expelled a few months earlier or incarcerated in labor camps).⁵⁷ Out of the 2,000 women fated for “transfer” by way of this kind of expulsion, conducted “willingly,” about 800 refused to evacuate despite threats made by the Jewish forces.



Fig. 3.7

What lies were these women told in order to convince them to submit to “repatriation”? What kind of pressure was put on them? To which types of violence were they exposed, in order that three-fifths of them would “give” their consent not only to leave their homes—they were already forced to leave them when they were evacuated from Tantura—but to also leave their country? What lies were needed to convince those carrying out the violence of expulsion of the plausibility of the term “repatriation”? In the absence of photographs from this phase, we cannot say much about the means employed to obtain the women’s consent, nor about the fate of those who refused. We can only say that this preparatory phase had to be concluded before the scene was opened to photographers, who were invited to affirm with their cameras the success of the repatriation operation. Convening a sort of press conference in the field was not about those who refused, nor was it an opportunity for the expellees to showcase their grievances. It was the imperial shutter at work.

In front of the cameras and representatives of the international community, unexpectedly, this elderly man dared to stop, to withdraw his consent. Halting precisely in front of the cameras, he threatens to spoil the orchestrated spectacle of Arabs “leaving of their own will.” Not much work is required in order to argue that were he a prisoner of war, representatives of various NGOs and military forces would not be seen gesticulating around him, trying to find the right words and gestures to force him, without direct violence, to accept his fate, respect the consent form he signed, and leave his homeland of his own free will, forever.

Once this photograph was placed in the archive, the ICRC required its workers to preserve the caption as if it were fused with the photograph. My request for permission to include the photograph in a publication and exhibition was denied. This had nothing to do with what is in the photograph, which is still accessible in the ICRC archives, nor did it have to do with my particular way of interpreting it, since the archivists could not have known in advance what I planned to write. Rather, it was about my stated intention to append my own caption to that of the ICRC. It was about questioning the way that the photograph endured in the archive through language that made this man a prisoner of war and made this entire operation one of repatriation, while it was actually a forced transfer from one's homeland.

The ICRC's implied anxiety, however, was not unfounded. Indeed, I did study those photographs together with the photographed person as my companion, even if, according to the imperial archive, our worlds—as well as our memories and political roles—are meant to be kept apart.

[With My Companion at the Entrance of the Archive](#)

Looking at the photograph of the elderly man taken at the moment he was forced out of his homeland, viewing him forced to leave with almost no belongings, and given that we know that at the same time Palestinians' archives were looted and incorporated into Israeli archives, I propose to see in this moment also the moment when he is dispossessed of the material culture and of the protection that archives provide as enduring worldly places. At the same time, when those who circle him were able to close the shutter behind him, to erect a nonreturn border, Palestinian archives lost the protection of the people who recognize their existence as meaningful beyond any instrumental project and hence also in need of their protection. At the moment Palestinians were transferred, their archives became vulnerable to looting. And indeed, they were looted. Saying it differently, his expulsion and the shuttering of his refusal to be expelled is sanctioned by the looting of Palestinian archives and the entitlement of Israeli Jews to study Palestinian culture in and through archives, in the absence—or in the differential presence—of Palestinians and their archives other than as objects in the hands of the colonizers. With the mass expulsion of Palestinians, their archives were partially destroyed and partially converted into a pile of appropriable segments by the newly established sovereign state and the international organizations that endowed these deeds with their acceptability.

[Looting Documents](#)

The removal of people's experience from operative political concepts is instrumental in imposing the triple imperial condition and rendering the violence it requires a negligible, necessary price in the completion of historical progress. The fact that my companion's removal occurred with political terms designed to rectify wrongs—repatriation—does not mean that these terms entirely lost their power to lead a recovery whose beneficiaries are not sovereign elites. Rather, it means that when terms such as repatriation or replevin, used in relation to documents, are used in a nonqualified, neutral manner by imperial states or the international organizations that represent them (such as the UN, UNESCO, or International Council of Museums), the originary imperial violence is not acknowledged. The preoccupation of state archivists with the “return” of documents (known as *replevin*) went in the mid-1990s through a process of standardization that reinforced the domination of the right of states to seize documents under the axiom that they should gain their “right place.” “[The] World’s archivists,” Trudy Huskamp Peterson describes,

attempted in 1994 to establish a policy on the replevin of captured records, they set the date after which all seized records should absolutely be returned at the end of the First World War, one archivist noting, “We can’t go back and undo Napoleon!”⁵⁸

Looting is a particular form of “changing hands”: it is simultaneously the process of depriving some people of what belongs to them and providing others with it in a way that naturalizes their possession of the looted material. The military context of the word *loot*, often emphasized in dictionaries, is relevant to the violent moment of deprivation but does not describe the civil naturalization of looted items. For the understanding of the archival acceptability of imperial looting, I study the looting of items not solely as a process of dispossessing one people, but also one of enriching another people, among whose members the looted objects are naturalized and who are called upon to use these newly acquired documents to perform their citizenship. State archives are neither the source of archival acceptability nor its final destination; they are relay stations in the consolidation of archival acceptability, of imperial looting as a condition.

In 1948, when Jews took hold of parts of Palestine and cleansed them of the Arab population, larger areas were declared “closed military zones” and vast treasures of property were looted. This was bureaucratically archived by the new colonizing state. Workers in the office of the custodian in the newly established state of Israel meticulously documented the exact date an item was received, the condition of the property, the estimated value, and often the person or institution that received it (see Fig. 3.8). To avoid the “unauthorized transfer of property,” entire areas were closed, as can be seen in this image from one of the wealthiest Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem, until the operation

was completed. Intellectual property—books, precious objects, documents, and photographs—became part of Israeli patrimony.⁵⁹ The appropriation of “Arab material” and its incorporation into overtly Jewish or Zionist archival institutions were reported as a matter of fact. It was often conducted with the help of professionals who did their best to protect the looted material from the nonprofessional hands that handled it, as the Jewish daily *Davar* reporter Ephraim Talmi wrote, calling readers to support the archive whose workers lacked adequate funds and infrastructure to pursue this important national task. “The Arab material,” Talmi writes, “is divided into four types [based on provenance]: from the Egyptian army; from the civil administration in Beersheba district; from the Liberation Army of Qawuqj; and from the government of Lebanon.”⁶⁰ Even though the looting was reported in newspapers, a few decades had to pass before the archive made accessible several documents that would confirm it and enable historians to discover the documents and assert with authority that the looted material was, indeed, looted material.



Fig. 3.8

This long delay effected by the archive makes looting appear as a process of unearthing, digging deep under the surface, discovering and disclosing hidden secrets, though the violence was never actually hidden.⁶¹ Even though imperial looting is rarely concealed, the pioneering ethos of discovering looting continues to shape its discussion, a cherished imperial trope that locates this discovery outside of the benign functioning of the political regime. In fact, looting was known all along: it was an open secret.

I am interested in the looting that takes place in full sight, even in floodlit arenas. These public spectacles, involving the private or semi-private seizure of trophies, are essential elements in training Israeli citizens not to see the violence of which their citizenship consists. Rather than acting as one

who “unearths” the looting of Palestinian archives and who scientifically reconstructs these events from archival documents finally declassified, I instead insist on exploring these lootings as part of the regime-made disaster, always also manifest in the open, in public. To do otherwise would be to lend more weight to archival documents than to people’s grievances, testimonies, and actions. Learning from and with Palestinian companions, I cannot fail to see that the different instantiations of looting were not limited to the expropriation of documents but became central to the experience of being governed differentially. This companionship becomes a way to engage one another outside our respective imperial roles.

Photographs of looting and looted photographs can—and should—teach us about archives, archival procedures and law, archivists and their field of expertise (see Fig. 3.9). Looking at certain photographs from the peak of the war that the state of Israel waged against those it made into “infiltrators” (from its creation up to the late 1950s), photographs taken by soldiers that are now shared publicly on digital platforms, we can learn about the ways photographs are handled, the body language of expropriation and appropriation, the ceremonies of taking pictures with acquired trophies, and the judgments soldiers make on the meanings and uses of photographs, whether as incriminating evidence of enemy aspirations, as confidential or dangerous material, or as signs of cultural hierarchies and distinctions. The looted materials are sorted according to military needs and general and particular interests. Short- and long-term different concerns guide the soldiers in deciding which documents they take with them and which they leave behind, thus demonstrating the documents’ value in the soldiers’ estimation. Some recurrent gestures, visible in many of the images taken at sites of looting but seldom discussed as constitutive of the archive, deserve attention and inclusion in our understanding of what an archive is.



Fig. 3.9

These sights of destroyed archives show ostentatious disregard for Palestinian archives, the role they play in the social fabric, the labor invested in them (see Fig. 3.10). Piles of papers are thrown on the ground in complete disorder. The soldiers claim the authority to act as archivists determining the value of documents and deciding their fate. The destruction is produced according to calculated decisions with the aim of publicly showing that Palestinians are unable to protect their own assets, thus providing the justification for a “rescue” operation of records to be brought “back home” with the soldiers. Documents are sorted during (or sometimes after) the military operation by those who are not recognized as archivists but who act as such, as well as by the hands of recognizable archivists and librarians who handle them later with the proper professional care and scientific attention. Some materials, with or without the consent of army commanders, are taken out of the national booty and put into the realm of private individuals, serving as personal souvenirs that socialize family members into the imperial practice of looting.



Fig. 3.10

The soldier in the photograph is an archivist, authorized to handle photographic collections (see Fig. 3.11). Though he does not wear gloves and does not look like any of the familiar experts who welcome us into official archives, there is no reason to deny that much of the material we consult in state archives around the world was procured in a similar way. In his naked hands he holds a bunch of papers and photographs. The mission of his unit was to pursue “infiltrators” before or after they crossed the border into Israel, during what were called “retaliation operations.” A major aim of these military operations was the looting of documents, including photographs.



Fig. 3.11

In this photo, probably taken during a nighttime operation, several soldiers crowd around a number of small photographs held by one soldier. This soldier shows the photographs to his unit-mates and passes some of them over to the soldier standing next to him. The soldiers whose attention is focused on the photos seem rather amused by what they see. We cannot know what is in these photos, or whether they are personal or official. We can tell, however, that looking together at looted photographs, seen without permission, is a bonding moment transforming a crime not only into an acceptable act but also an enjoyable one. The soldiers' way of holding their photographic booty arouses reasonable suspicion that not all photographs were deposited in archives and that some photographs—reaching military offices that found them neither incriminating nor valuable—were trashed instead or kept privately as trophies.

Here is another photo, this one from another military operation at an outpost in Gaza, in which a soldier poses with his booty, probably after his return from the military operation, based on his posture, the full daylight, and the skyline reminiscent of a Jewish settlement (see Fig. 3.12). He presents to the camera Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir’s portrait printed on the center of a kerchief as incriminating evidence, demonstrative of the fact that Egyptians, and perhaps even Palestinian refugees in Gaza, adore their leader. (In Israel, al-Nasir was portrayed as a despot, not as a postwar leader aiding the process of decolonization.) The soldier is indifferent to the kerchief as an intimate

possession of its owner, as a popular medium for sharing photography, or as a medium for communicating political opinions during the era of Egypt's decolonization.⁶²



Fig. 3.12

The photo-kerchief was not appropriated in the imperial manner of enriching national patrimony with a valuable object; it was appropriated as a document that testifies to a backward culture with a personality cult, oblivious to its specific nature as an owned object invested with meaning. To this day, the destruction of decades of photographic activity in Palestine has not ceased to affect conditions for the possibility of creating and researching photography in the entire region. Photographs taken in other places and times by Palestinians, with the intention of documenting the destruction unleashed by Israeli soldiers as they looted archives of documents and photographs, reaffirms this assertion about the way photographs are handled when looted. These military operations are not identified as part of archival procedures even though they play an important role in them. Soldiers (and enslavers, as I'll argue in the last chapter) should not be studied as actors in the background of these otherwise peaceful archival institutions. When warriors are left outside of our understanding of the archive, archivists continue to be understood, even by those who propose a critical study of the constitutive role of pillage in the establishment of state archives, as those who come late to the picture, taking care of papers already stored in archives. Collecting war trophies is an imperial archival practice.

International regulations and orders against looting issued by the 1954 Hague convention and reiterated by different states instructing soldiers how to handle cultural property should not only be understood according to what they prohibit but also for what they permit. American soldiers in Iraq or

Afghanistan, for example, are endowed with the authority to act as sentries and to guard, restore, and return property to local archives. General Order 1A from December 19, 2000, Section 2(g) prohibits “Removing, possessing, selling, defacing or destroying archeological artifacts or national treasures,” and section 2(k) forbids “taking or retaining individual souvenirs or trophies.”⁶³ Archival documents, not mentioned explicitly in the 1907 Hague convention, are “both cultural and administrative property and fit somewhat awkwardly in a purely cultural definition,” and therefore oscillate between the 1954 convention and the 1907 convention.⁶⁴ They seem to be the object of a more permissive regulation, as Peterson argues in her reading of the 1907 Hague convention:

In Article 53 of the Annex, the Convention permits an army of occupation to “take possession of all movable property belonging to the State which may be used for military operations.” Battle maps, battle plans, organization charts, orders, architectural drawings of fortifications, engineering documents for weapons systems, plus any other government document that could be used by the military to disrupt the organization of the enemy are all included in this provision.⁶⁵

The creation of nation-states is enabled through violence as well as compliance with international law, conventions, treaties, and regulations. The “administrative needs” of new powers are recognized in the Hague conventions, and sovereign regimes tend to understand the ownership of documents as part of their prerogative “to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.”

The massive appropriation of Palestinian archives in 1948 as part of the creation of the state of Israel has been reiterated periodically ever since. As could be grasped from the photographs from later years (1955, 1982) that I have discussed (see [figs. 3.9, 3.10](#)), Israeli soldiers regularly invade institutions and public and private buildings, remove materials of value, and trample anything in which they have no interest or which stands in their way. They collect documents they deem valuable, dangerous, or incriminating and proudly get their pictures taken with the booty.⁶⁶ Later, having sorted the documents and kept what was necessary in military archives, they give the rest to professional archivists and librarians, expecting the experts to treat the material with proper attention. The fate of the looted material is mostly unknown and no one is accountable for it under the hegemonic discourse of the archive, as it usually does not fall under the category of preservation and conservation. For decades, despite their obviously looted provenance, most of the Israeli historians who study these documents have not questioned their right to use them or the meaning of the violence involved in making them available to Israelis, especially those of Jewish origins. To question this prerogative, they would have to question their citizenship as a right based on these looted archives and the right of the state to exist and give to them what was taken from others. In the 1980s, some individuals referred

to themselves as “new [Israeli Jews] historians,” a label used to distinguish themselves from the previous generation of citizen-historians like themselves, that is, Israeli-Jews. Others, who did question Israeli citizenship and the right of the state to exist, and who were also preoccupied with writing the history of their field, were not referred to by these citizen-historians as historians—they were studied as “infiltrators” or, being Palestinians, they were simply not included in this historiography.

The triple imperial condition delineates the catastrophe of the destruction of Palestine to the Palestinians’ part of history, as if with the partition of the land, history too could be partitioned. This could make sense only because the partition of the land finds its correlates in the partition of the world into separate areas of governance, study, and rights. Not only could Israeli historians not recognize the violent basis of their privileges that exist as weapons against others; in their “partitioned” approach to the catastrophe they were oblivious to the ways in which they were harmed by losing the capacity—or being born into a position from which such capacity is barred—to recognize violence done to others. Unlearning the imperial archive is necessary for recognizing imperial violence as affecting the entire body politic—not only those it targets, but also those it claims as accomplices.

The Archon’s Seduction and the Scholar’s Desire

In his influential book *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida analyzes the archive and reveals its secret as violence: “the violence of the archive itself, *as archive, as archival violence.*”⁶⁷ He starts with the figure of the *archon*, the guardian of documents, the sentry:

The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law.⁶⁸

The archon, Derrida argues, is the first of the three pylons supporting the archive, the law, is the second, and the Greek *arkheion*, the house (the place) is the third. In locating *Arkhē* as both *commencement* and *commandment*, at the conceptual core of the archive, Derrida alternately places emphasis on documents and on the law. “To be guarded thus,” Derrida continues, “in the jurisdiction of this *speaking the law*, they [the documents] needed at once a guardian and a localization.”⁶⁹ This conflation between law and documents is troubling and is made possible only when the internal machination of the archive is centered around the “core” of the archive. The philosopher can only

grasp its essence, what Derrida calls its “topo-nomology,” “without which no archive would ever come into play or appear as such,” when the noisy presence of people is removed.⁷⁰

Derrida’s account of the archive is schematic and abstract, that is, devoid of human action except that of the guardians. His own engagement with the archive, his activity as an archivist (true, he is not an expert, but why should we fully delegate our right to the sentries when as cocitizens we have been historically betrayed by them?) does not leave its impression; he remains external to the mechanism of the archive that he describes, a guest who comes after its constitution. Such external observation of *how the archive works* could not be obtained were Derrida not being lured, seduced by the sentries to look at their work from the outside, to track down the borders they set and the fences they erect, and by doing so to acknowledge the law they guard. After all, part of the sentries’ work is to fool the one who stands at the archive’s entrance and make him or her believe that they, notwithstanding the law they guard, were there before. Yet, in turn, Derrida tries to fool the sentries, writing that

in an enigmatic sense [...] the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. [...] It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.⁷¹

The problem, however, is not about fooling the sentries but about recognizing them as existing in a different tense than what they shield from others. The solidity of the archive, its congealing of imperial power and its constant reproduction of imperial temporality, forecloses from the imagination the eventuality of cocitizens’ acting and interacting with each other against the archive’s premises and the regime of privileges for which it stands. Yet despite this, the archive was made by people, for some and against others. It is never empty space, as the sentries claim, and it cannot be conceptualized as if citizens had never set foot inside it, and as if, had they indeed done so, no different type of archive would have blossomed where they set foot. By focusing on the figure of the sentry, Derrida’s influential essay exemplifies this omission.

By assuming that the sentries’ original presence in the archive predates all others, the philosopher makes himself complicit with the sentries, denying people’s interactions—including his own with the archive. These interactions consist of refusing to hand over some documents, smuggling some documents out of the vicinity of the archive, copying documents illicitly, burning some of them, and sharing others at random or even selling them for a profit. Yet if one chooses not to ignore these people whose entrance to the archive is denied or delayed and instead become their companions, rather than relating to the archive as an accomplished place of the law with incontestable archons, the archive can no longer be assumed to be merely a place but rather becomes a threshold. As such, it is

no longer possible to prioritize the archons' pretension to be guardians of a consummate sovereignty over the living reality of masses of deprived and dispossessed cocitizens.

At the archive's entrance, the question *what is an archive*—a place or a threshold, a depository of documents or an apparatus of rule, an accomplished law or contested violence—is essential if one wants to avoid siding with the sentries. To side with the sentries would mean only looking inward, thus viewing those dispossessed by the archive solely through their presence in the documents preserved inside it, that is, as “infiltrators” or “refugees,” provided by the differential sovereignty that the archive is made to serve. Those who continue to be dispossessed by the archive and forced to embody these political categories do not expect to find in it a future remedy such as the one Derrida depicts when he writes, “If we want to know what [the archive] will have meant, we will only know in times to come [...] a spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive.”⁷²

My Palestinian companion’s refusal to inhabit the figure of the infiltrator is not an expression of a spectral messianicity but rather a rejection of the violence forced on Palestinian bodies and a persistent call that denies their relegation to a past detached from what came after and a future made into an *a priori* law whose meaning is still to be revealed. With him kept outside of the border of his homeland, not the threshold of the archive, even without wearing a military uniform, the sentries appear as soldiers in the same army that endangers his life.

Refusing the Past

The eighteenth century’s revolutionary gesture of imposing a new beginning was a declaration intended to say that from now on everything should ensue from the law that marks this beginning. People’s experiences, claims, properties, statutes, and achievements are doomed to become obsolete, unless they correspond to the new law. When the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen became an archival document and was about to become the foundation of the French constitution, Olympe de Gouges ignored its status as a cherished past document of an already completed action. She archived it, though not as a file preserved in a dedicated building. She archived it within another document that she authored, the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen, which she serially printed and distributed widely. De Gouges reiterated the same type of language but introduced significant changes that transformed that document, which had excluded women. The archived Declaration was turned from a founding document testifying to something concluded and encased in the archive into one way of refusing to be governed differentially. Rather than confining the male Declaration to the archive as a precious piece of history, de Gouges insisted on keeping it in

the political realm in which she, as well as others, could continue to act and interact. She offered one copy of her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen to the queen, Marie Antoinette. What she actually offered to the queen was not just a text to be read, but rather an archival template for preventing a foundational document of injustice from being sealed in the archive as a founding document without opposition. In de Gouges's template, this Declaration is preserved with—or more accurately within—its contraband.

Centralized archives seek acknowledgment that what is in their possession is rightfully theirs and should remain theirs. Even if and when someone questions the particular archival performance of ownership, the struggle is already framed as a struggle over something that happened in the past. Let me present another example. The director of the Picture Gallery of Sanssouci, in his letter to Frederick William II on March 10, 1810, describes the exchange he had with Vivant Denon, the director of Musée Napoleon (the renamed Louvre until 1815, when it became the Louvre once again) after Denon visited the gallery, under Napoleon's orders, to select the best pieces to be transferred to Paris:

When I tried here and there to prevent his looting by pointing out that none of our ancient statues could compete, neither in artistic quality nor state of preservation, with the masterpieces of Paris, he replied, and it obviously did no harm, that any antique piece whatever it is, has a certain value.⁷³

Denon refutes the gallery director's arguments about quality and foregrounds the absolute value of "any antique piece," shaped and coordinated through imperial institutions. The materials to be looted and worth being looted are not archival documents, but they are inseparable from the archival documents that precede the looting and continue to be produced throughout the looting as they testify to previous ownership and complete its transference. In his letter, the director describes Denon's commitment to papers and the final act of the process: "He said he would deliver me a receipt when we picked up the statue, so I could justify myself to my king."⁷⁴

This is the protection provided by the archive: that what is taking place now already in some way belongs to the past. Documents to remove doubts abound. During the Napoleonic wars, various countries' documents were seized. Their incorporation into the National Archives in Paris was announced as their salvation.⁷⁵ Part of those European states' archives looted during Napoleon's expeditions were returned (or at least promised to be returned) to the countries from which they were plundered.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the archive ceremoniously states that their rightful place is forever in the past. Forcing an archive to disown what it made its own is not common.⁷⁷

The governed can hardly challenge the archive on questions of ownership, though imperial archives could not function without people laying hold of some of the documents that are provided by the archive or that are destined, at a certain point, to be claimed by it. People hold—by coincidence, by force, or by norm—papers that imperial archives could claim as their own. The trade in these documents is not new, but its exposure through online shopping companies entailed the distribution of regulations and normative modes of behavior. Here is an example of a statement issued by the National Archives clarifying to the American public what is expected from good citizens:

Most American citizens return U.S. government documents (*federal, congressional, and presidential records*) to the National Archives once they realize that the historical documents are lost or stolen. Most citizens realize that democratic societies require a clear record of government actions and decisions for accountability purposes and to ensure that citizen rights and equities are preserved.⁷⁸

An echo of the social contract soliciting citizens to give the state the right to exercise violence on their behalf can hardly be dismissed here. A special warning is directed to indocile citizens:

When identified historical U.S. government documents are not returned willingly, the National Archives has the legal authority to retrieve them in court through a legal action called replevin. NARA [US National Archives and Records Administration] works with the Department of Justice, including the FBI, in pursuing these cases.⁷⁹

Even though the archive performs the authoritarian position, the multitude of negotiations and types of circulations exercised by the governed make it clear that the archive cannot complete and sanction what by definition even the sovereign power cannot fully achieve. Something is indeed wrong with the mission associated with the archive as guardian of the past. Unlearning the historiographical framework, which denies the essential lateness of “critical” approaches to the archive, is to unlearn the greatest achievement of the archive, the production of the past as given. Unlearning imperial temporal markers (“It is no longer”) is already a way to listen to and interact with those who respond to every blow of violence exercised against them with the claim “we are not what your archival documents attest that we are.” Without our complicity in acknowledging the existence of the past, the archive could no longer produce “the past.”

The sensory offering of grasping and touching the brownish papers that we are meant to look for in the archive makes the past palpable. The gloves that we are given to wear when we touch these past documents are meant to protect the documents, but are no less intended to interpellate us as believers in the realm of the past. The archive was pivotal in a series of institutions that produced the past and made it archivable as past. The documents preserved in the archive are not past documents

but imperial tools used to determine the division of roles among the governed—“slaves,” “refugees,” “infiltrators,” “citizens” and others—and to script the relationship between them. The imperial regime is reproduced and prolonged, among other ways, by transforming these documents into metonyms of what is over.

Here is another example of a scholar practicing potential history with a companion and of a person refusing to let past violence be sealed in the past. In his discussion of the history of African Americans reparations’ claims, Robin D. G. Kelley quotes a letter sent by Jourdon, a former slave, to his former master, Colonel P. H. Anderson.⁸⁰ This letter is actually a reply to Anderson’s letter in which he invites Jourdon to return to his plantation, now as a paid laborer. The Emancipation Proclamation was meant to put an end to crimes of slavery by creating a break, a discontinuity, and making these crimes past crimes, archiving them by imposing a new era. Colonel Anderson’s letter exemplifies this approach to time. He offers a new and decent contract to his former slave. Yet, in the new contract, Jourdon recognizes the continuity of the old one wherein crimes against him and his community were committed with impunity and enforced through punishment. Jourdon recognizes the violence exercised by sealing violence in the past and insists on his right to shape the contract under which he will be employed and to making sure the new contract is genuinely different:

[We are] afraid to go back without proof that you were disposed to treat us justly and kindly; and we [Jourdon and his wife Mandy] have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future.⁸¹

After a brief explanation why—even according to the principles of liberal capitalism, the Jourdons’ demand is a “sound, reasonable case for receiving compensation for years of unpaid labor”—Kelley changes tone and addresses the reader in the second person: “My guess is that most of you laughed out loud after reading Jourdon’s letter and some might have found it incredible.”⁸²

If this document had been studied by Kelley as expressing the state of mind of a formerly enslaved person, that is, as a document that encapsulates an untold story about the past, Kelley’s second-person address to his readers would be unnecessary. It becomes necessary precisely because Kelley’s historical narrative refuses the sharp division between past and present and reiterates Jourdon’s claim in the present. In other words, Kelley joins Jourdon in refusing to let the past be past and arguing for reparations.

We can assume that at the moment Jourdon writes his letter, he, his wife, and their two daughters are still recovering from the crimes committed against them. Jourdan and Mandy’s claim is not about

the past but about the commons, about the way they share the world with those who, until a moment ago, could abuse them overtly. Jourdon does envisage a possibility of forgiveness, but not until the crimes are acknowledged, brought to an end by and through repair and compensation. This can only occur through the perpetrators' recognition of these crimes as unacceptable and intolerable; through active engagement in breaking their archival acceptability; through advocating as a right the refusal to act against others, refusal to continue to be perpetrators of such crimes; and, in turn, willingness through struggle to make others acknowledge these crimes.

Had the endless number of similar claims and statements that are preserved in the archive—claims that preceded Jourdon's and followed it—not been considered for centuries as nonexistent, unimaginable, impossible to believe, and illegitimate, and had they not been dismissed as unspoken, the triple imperial principle would not have been experienced as a given condition but rather as a violent enterprise in whose reproduction we partake. When Jourdon and Mandy's claim is reconstructed together with many other claims, an intergenerational choir emerges and laughter ceases to be a plausible response. Toward the end of his letter, Jourdon makes a request: “Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.”⁸³ These crimes, Jourdon informs Colonel Anderson, are not only about making people like us victims—they are also about making people like you perpetrators, either leader-perpetrators or simple citizen-perpetrators. In this very last sentence, he shows Anderson where to start: by remembering the moment when he was about to commit yet another crime and thanks to another—one George Carter—he was rescued from inhabiting this position of a perpetrator-leader. The past is unsettled, Jourdon and Mandy claim, and demands for reparations cannot be dismissed.

People's Experience and the Imperial Archive

The archive, I have shown throughout this chapter, is a modality of access to the commons and not a shrine of past documents. This is not to say that the more common definitions of the archive, like that given by John Tagg as “an apparatus of rationalization and social management” are entirely false.⁸⁴ As I have shown, there are many archives whose assigned mission is to function in the way described by Tagg. However, this is only one particular mode of functioning and cannot serve as an abstract or universal model from which the archive should be conceptualized.

The archive is a site where different struggles take place. Even state and bureaucratic archives, which are most often identified with this particular definition of the archive, can be reduced to this description only if the archives and the citizens who use them are also reduced only to occupants of

the symbolic place allocated to them in the imperial sovereign imaginary. The archive should be understood on the basis of people's concrete, material, emotional, visceral, and political presence and their interactions with archives as such.

Tagg is not oblivious to the archive's potential to "begin to speak again," that is, to speak differently, after exercising gestures of extraction and concealment, as happened in some examples he mentions—after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic, Ceausescu's Romania, Argentina after the Dirty War, or Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge—nor is he oblivious to the fact that "at least potentially, the drive to close the semantic circuit of the archive is always open at every point to resistance and contestation."⁸⁵ Yet, he concludes his text with an endorsement of Agamben's argument on the apparatus: "There is no question of redeeming this process by civic vigilance aimed at using the apparatus correctly. Those who advocate this," Tagg writes, "are merely speaking for the apparatus that captured them" and concludes that since the archive "cannot be taken over" it "has to be smashed."⁸⁶

The desire to smash the archive is as old as the archive itself. People sought to destroy documents stored in the archive, its building (when there was one), to hack the index that enables/disables access to data, to use or abuse its accessories, to intervene in its procedures of alienation, and so forth. But when people acted in this way, they did not conceive of themselves as strangers to the archive, nor did they conceive of the archive in its totality as a totalizing machine from whose operation people are absent so that they can authorize themselves to smash it altogether. Their actions targeted particular archives, procedures, devices, and documents. They dared to withdraw from a particular agenda of preservation in relation to a particular corpus of information such as lists of "targets," that is, people to be assassinated by the state, the destruction of specific sets of records or modes of procuring them since they had a particular interest in them, and specific claims regarding the archive's functioning and how it had abused its authority. By doing so they implied that the archive was also theirs, or, more accurately, that those who had a share in it have a right to resist if it is used against people.

Tagg is less concerned with particular archives and more with the archive in general, and it is from this generalized archive he derives the reason and justification for smashing it. Tempting as such a call may sound, we have enough reasons to question whether such an impulse is not also imperially conditioned. Let me recall two of the imperial principles implied in any approach to the archive that positions our actions as secondary, external, and inessential to its logic and functioning. First, the temporal: when we enter the archive, it always claims to be already established and accomplished, and hence protected and immune to our actions. Second, the spatial: the archive is over there, distinct,

in secluded places and buildings that we citizens access only from the outside. Conceptualized as this omnipotent and already accomplished institution, the construction of our interactions *with it* as external and belated actions *upon it* doomed them to failure in a way that only a messianic destruction may appear the right way to resist the archive. However, when one insists on the array of people's modes of interaction with the archive as the point of departure for conceptualizing the archive and writing its potential history, when people's bodies, actions, ideas, achievements, and failures are part of the archive, the archive as a modality of access to the common cannot be ignored. The call to smash the archive risks being a call to abolish the accumulation of people's actions out of which the archive is made.

When a Sentry Asks What Exactly Am I Doing and Why?

What do we look for in and through archives? Taking a quick look at the material configuration of imperial archives, we can recall the extent to which modes of filing documents, let alone searching for them, are lined with a rich constellation of props, accessories, and mechanisms (see Fig. 3.13). Obviously, they serve as different kinds of sentries: cards, forms to be filled, search engines, lists, code words, folders, clerks, laws, regulations, gloves, aprons, robes, brushes, chemicals, customs, and rituals.⁸⁷ They are in place to remind us that the past is at hand. Data and notes must be salvaged and treated with caution. Every piece of paper must be returned to the exact place where it was found, even if we have our reservations about the place allotted to it, the content of its records, or the way it was acquired. However, this constellation, aimed at distancing us, is meant at the same time to bring us closer, to ensure that, in the archive's garden of forking paths, we shall behave in a manner that will not disturb the rest of the items, that we will not follow our thirst to paint an all-too-encompassing picture, made up of materials from more than a handful of folders at once. This suspending constellation seeks to ensure that we will not devour the archival items the way Chronos devoured his children, in order to later regurgitate them, willingly or at random, as dwellers of the present, as our current contemporaries. More important, this arrangement ensures that we believe we have entered the realm of the past. But we are there, in the archive, and we resist these measures, just as we resist our removal from the conceptualization of the archive.



Fig. 3.13

Think for a moment of Anat Kam: a young Israeli woman who, in mid-2000, during her compulsory military service, collected digital documents containing explicit discussions and instructions regarding the assassination of Palestinians, euphemistically referred to as “targeted killing.” In 2008, two years after her release from military service, she deposited a CD, on which she had burned copies of these documents, in the hands of a *Haaretz* journalist who published some of its damning contents. Following an investigation by the Israeli Security Service, the journalist gave away enough information to expose his source, and Kam was arrested soon after and accused of treason.

Imagine her, first, as one of the sentries, more accurately their servant, an eighteen-year-old female soldier doing her compulsory military service, part of the ranks guarding those documents from the public eye. Now imagine her as a citizen encountering these valuable documents, in which people are doomed to death without being brought to trial. Imagine an abrupt awakening of her consciousness from its automatism and reiteration, the possible awareness that arises from viewing such documents. Imagine her, now acting as a cocitizen, telling herself something like, “If I don’t rescue these documents they will be trashed or, at best, stored in the archive for another forty or eighty years. Either way, they will escape the public eye and will not entail any intervention to stop what, for the moment, appears to me unacceptable, even though it was nothing but the reiteration of common procedures.”

Imagine Kam’s horror while reading the contents of those documents, as well as her determination, the well-known and often praised “fanatical dedication” of rescuers of documents and

objects, rescuers who at certain moments felt like they must do everything they could to spare documents from annihilation. Here, she experienced the non-imperial variation of this drive—she had to do anything she could in order to rescue these documents from the jaws of the archive if she wanted to spare people from annihilation. Imagine her swallowing one document after another, all two thousand of them, ingesting them, making sure not a single crumb escapes her lips. She did not neglect her duties as a sentry, in charge of the gates of that archive. In fact, she watched over the documents well, made sure to produce copies, and established several rules of her own.

When two years had passed, one day she burst with anger, shame, rage, fear, and responsibility, realizing that keeping the documents for herself, in her own belly as it were, deprives the archive she had produced on her computer of the public dimension that justifies the very existence of an archive, that enables the retrieval of documents and their availability to others. Therefore, in the responsible manner of an archivist, instead of whimsically depositing the documents at the hands of just anyone she happened to meet, Kam gave them to a journalist of a respectable newspaper. In hindsight, this proved to be the wrong choice, since in the public sphere of an imperial sovereign regime that executes people, journalists are no less sovereign-citizens than others.

This seems like the right time to provide a preliminary answer to the question “What do we look for in and through archives?” We look for that which we have deposited in them, as this kind of “we” that was forced to emerge through and out of the violence of the archive, a “we” that does not converge into a collective of national, racial, or ethnic identity, a “we” that is necessary for unlearning the regime of the archive. Based on Anat Kam’s archival work, we can say that this “we” ought to be regarded as the reason and sense of the archive, if we want to undermine the imperial basis of the archive that replaced it with the “past.” When the past is assumed as the archive’s foundation, more time is stolen from the governed, inviting them to believe that at the end of time, history itself would come knocking on the gates of the archive, demanding to settle the accounts.

As said, a cadre of accessories and aids assist us in the many windings of the archive: sponges over which crumbling papers must be placed, desks, lamps, reproduction and deciphering instruments, card catalogs, indexes, white gloves. Had the public right to access everything in the archive not been recognized as an inalienable one, even if many are deprived of realizing it, no one would have gone through the trouble of supplying visitors with such aids. This is the case even when, at times, the main purpose of these aids is to keep people’s bodies from bursting with withheld rage because access continues to be denied to them or to others who know that within the walls of the archive, sometimes between its lines, the very items they are seeking are stored.

Withheld rage, suffocation, nausea, anger, frustration, fright, horror, and helplessness (no less than the hope, joy, patience, sense of justice, bliss, or passion reported by those taken by archive frenzy) bear witness to the fact that archival documents are not merely a collection of dead letters. They are not items of a completed past but, rather, the active elements of a common present. They must be properly handled—and “properly” cannot be determined by imperial actors or reduced to one of their traits, such as being a document—precisely because they are the means by which regime-made disaster might continue to be wrought—just as they might serve as the means of enabling some restitution of that which continues to occur in the present.

Since archived documents touch upon shared life, they carry information about that life: decrees and rulings responsible for its design, claims to challenge it, documentation of its modes of repression, proposals for change, and other information ensuring its continuance. Thus, the archive is not about preserving the past but about modes of sharing the common. The way the many do archival work and exercise their right to do so, the way the many handle any of the archive’s items in a present tense, and the way the many force any sealed document stamped as “past” to be opened up for others to continue to interact with the actions they still convey—these are also the actions of which an archive consists.⁸⁸

The habitus that I have briefly described here is not that of a professional historian tracing the past, but is rather that of cocitizens like the French women on their way to Versailles, Jourdon and Mandy, the whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu, and Anat Kam; of activists, asylum seekers, family members and community activists, informed children and courageous stateless people, scholars of in-between disciplines, workers and laborers equipped with common sense and nonimperial responsibility.

Cohorts of nonprofessional archivists are motivated by the assumption that what is experienced as the condition of unstoppable imperial movement is nonetheless reversible—and archival work is one of the keys to enact reversibility. Intervention, imagination, transmission, accession, deaccession, plasticization, or open-ended indexicality are some of the procedures through which cocitizens exercise their archival rights, that is, the right to make use of the archive with others who have been excluded from entering. None of these procedures is emancipatory or oppressive in itself. It is the exclusion of people from the ways documents are used against them that define the outcome of the use of these procedures. Together, they refuse the archive’s claim to seal the past. Together, they insist the archive be a commons.

Unruly Photographs

As I have argued throughout, documents cannot be tamed by the archive, given that the archive is a modality of accessing the commons. Photographic archives are an exponentiation of this modality, since photography is also such a modality. What is recorded in photographs is always more than what was intended, even though this *more* can be kept “visibly invisible.”⁸⁹ Even though imperial rule and sovereign regimes use photography in their constitution, implementation, and exercise, photographs are not considered archival minutiae in the strict sense of the term. Occasionally, sensational images could be censured, modified, or confiscated; photographers could be denied access to zones where state crimes were committed; cameras could be seized and collections looted, but the majority of photographs taken evaded the archival policy of written papers. Viewed and read scrupulously and across the imperial divides, many of the images that did circulate, and that were printed in official albums and publications as expressions of confidence, triumphalism, and pride, could become criminalizing documents of events whose written summaries continue to be accessible only in closed-door meetings or in the censor’s chambers. Imperial political regimes may not have been as oblivious and as inattentive to the unsettling potential of photography, leaving them often unguarded and exposed, if scholars or others would have approached photographic images as the explosive material that they looked for in written documents.

This relative negligence toward photography by imperial elites, archivists, statesmen, civil servants, and scholars can be explained mainly by their instrumental approach to photography and the prioritization of the photograph over the event out of which it was taken. Citizens are socialized to recognize in the photographs political ideas and categories, such as “victory,” “refugee,” or “independence,” and, almost without blinking, to acknowledge them as discernible entities in the photographs. When photography is assumed to be the product of photographers or as a vehicle conveying ideas and messages, the common world implied by photography, as well as its incomplete and unruly temporality that resists the past–present–future divide, could hardly be appreciated. Through two cases, I shall present the way nonimperial approaches to photographic archives foreground and undermine their imperial basis. The first is an attempt to challenge the axiom of “scarcity of images,” related to the mass rape of German women at the end of World War II; the second is an attempt to challenge the factuality of the presence of the infiltrator in the archive.

Recoding Photographic Data: Mass Rape in Berlin, 1945

World War II did not end on a specific date but was rather an ongoing campaign of violence meant to yield a new world order, administered by the Allies. To see the violence of the new world order,

consider that at the official “end” of World War II with the Allied victory, anywhere from a few hundred thousand to 2 million German women were raped. There is no disagreement among researchers about the widespread occurrence of rape, only about the precise number of women who were violated.⁹⁰ These rapes are discussed, though not in depth or at length, in quite a few historical accounts of 1945, none of which focuses on this issue (see Fig. 3.14). Many of these publications include a small insert of photographs from 1945, from which a visual account of rape is still absent. From the books I consulted in my research, out of 9,558 pages of books focusing on the year 1945, only 161 address the mass rape of German women. Out of the thousands of photos taken in Germany in 1945 and published in a few dozen albums, there is no mention of rape at all.



Fig. 3.14

Starting in April 1945 and continuing over the course of several weeks, rape occurred in different places, as the destruction of buildings was carefully recorded in numerous trophy photographs by professional photographers as well as soldier-archivists. Given that textual evidence exists, to ask where the photos of these rapes are, then, is not to search for evidence that women were systematically raped, but rather to ask an onto-political question that defies the presumption of absence of such images. Expectations from a “photograph of rape” to convey an image of a torn female body may be related to the dominant documentary ideology of capturing a decisive moment and locating violence in the bodies of the victims. Such expectation is inextricable from another—that after seventy years during which photos from this systemic violence of rape did not circulate, all of a sudden the archive will provide us with some rare, unseen images of torn bodies. Together they sustain the common paradigm of archival searches—scarcity—and the corresponding imperial role of a scholar-discoverer of large-scale and known catastrophes, both of which I reject.

When numerous oral accounts of victims of rape describe the destroyed urban fabric and the presence of armed soldiers in the streets as the arena of their rape, we should ask why none of these photos of destruction, widely available, was interpreted as constitutive of the visuality of rape. After all, the aim of photographic archives should not be to corroborate the known number of raped women with photos of their wounded bodies. That is, photographs should always be studied in connection to what the shutter sought to keep disconnected from what we are invited to see. My working assumption is that when we speak about conditions of systemic violence, we should not look necessarily for photographs of or about systemic violence, but rather explore photographs taken in those zones and decode them outside of the imperial epistemologies. After all, they were taken in the same places where rape took place and necessarily register more data than intended by those who took them. Maybe the rape did not happen on the third floor from where a photo is accessible, but on the second; maybe not in the apartment on the right, but in this one on the left. Maybe only three soldiers were involved and not four, and so on and so forth. The impossibility of stabilizing this kind of information, which may be crucial for the study of individual cases, is counterbalanced in this case by the possibility of exploring, through photographs, the conditions under which hundreds of thousands of women were held hostage, raped, and ruled by produced food shortages as modes of politico-physical subjugation in the destroyed urban spaces and porous private spaces of 1945 Berlin.

Destroyed German cities were quickly crowded with photojournalists and soldiers with cameras, some of whom acted as if nothing could stop them as they journeyed through the destruction, seeking out prime objects for the photographic gaze. The presence of rape, including both what preceded and what followed the physical violence, did not require any special haste in order to be detected and captured. It was pervasive; but still, it did not appear as a primary object for these photographers, in the way that the large-scale destruction of cities did (see Fig. 3.15). In the center of this photograph, for example, we can see a photographer holding his camera ready to be used in his left hand; in a broader sense, we also discern an interest in the photographer as a figure who is always ready, as this same photographer becomes the subject of another photograph being taken by the photographer featured to the right. This attention to the presence of photographers in zones of war and violence is reinforced by still another photographer: the one who took the photograph that pictures these two photographers in front of Berlin's destroyed Brandenburg Gate.



Fig. 3.15

In the context of the alleged absence of photographs of rape, we should instead look at this kind of photograph slightly differently and ask, where are the photographs of rape that these photographers took or could have been taking in a city plagued by rape? Did they not witness these rapes firsthand, or did they choose not to use their cameras when their fellow soldiers raped women in front of their eyes? Rather than expecting the emergence of what could be widely accepted as a “photograph of rape” from post-World War II Berlin, I propose to use this photograph as a placeholder in a photographic archive in formation, and relate to it as a particular species: the *untaken photograph of rape*, the *inaccessible photograph of rape*, the *undeveloped photograph*, the *not-yet-coded photograph of rape* or the *as-yet-unacknowledged photograph of rape*, depending on the circumstances under which the photographs were (or were not) taken, given, or disseminated, and on the position of spectator that we negotiate.

For now, this placeholder can be named an *untaken photograph of rape* (see Fig. 3.16). In eight books published in the last decade dedicated to 1945, in which I read what could have been descriptions of photographs of rape that were not taken, I inserted blank squares and drafted captions: “Untaken photograph, May 1945, Berlin. Women carry a wounded woman to the hospital so she can receive medical assistance after being raped (at least 90,000 women sought medical aid after being raped in Berlin alone),” or “Untaken photograph, June 1945, Berlin. A trail of blood leads to a nearby church, next to which the body of a young girl can be seen lying on the street.”



Fig. 3.16

Photographs should not be thought of as raw archival material, primary sources, or positive facts whose intrinsic meaning is to be spelled out through research. These many photographs were dissociated from what happened in the places where they were taken, and it is this dissociation that we ought to unlearn.

Under an imperial scopic regime of the shutter, “what was there” is equal to what made it into the frame as a legible object; thus, photographs are conflated with photography. In zones of systemic and omnipresent violence, the copresence of cameras and rape in the same unit of time and space should be enough to reject the axiom according to which there are no images of rape. In such zones, if *there are no photos at all*, we should argue that *all* photos should be explored as photos of the very same violence. Photos showing the massive destruction of built environments were my first sources in this attempt. With the help of a diary written by an anonymous woman in Berlin, published in 1953 under the title *A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City, a Diary*, I started to read photographs of perforated houses, heaps of torn walls, empty frames, uprooted doors, piles of rubble—all those elements that used to be pieces of homes—as the necessary spatial conditions under which a huge number of women were transformed into a population susceptible to violation.

The mass rape stopped toward the end of May 1945.⁹¹ Already in July 1945, the visual disappearance of rape was constructed carefully through tropes of substitution and displacement (see Fig. 3.17). With this photo, for example, taken in July 1945, we see how an urban trope of displacement operates. The chaotic, dilapidated environment that formed the arena of systemic rape in late April and early May had been remodeled and replaced by discrete destruction on relatively cleansed sidewalks, such as the building in the photograph. Though the photo was taken in July, it was described by the distribution agency as being “one of the scenes presented to the eyes of the allied soldiers who entered war-shattered Berlin.” The description focuses on the way the “battered city” was given to the eyes of Allied soldiers. Rather than interest in the way people experienced life in the battered city, the caption assumes the manifest permission of those who destroyed the city to continue to seize it, administer it, view it, and act as if they are not the destroyers but those who come to explore, to assist, and to restore order. It is the use of violence that grants the authority to take up

certain positions, such as that of the spectator, inhabited by the Allied occupation forces without remorse. In accordance with the familiar imperial protocol, the catastrophe one perpetrates becomes one's trophy, an object of one's gaze.

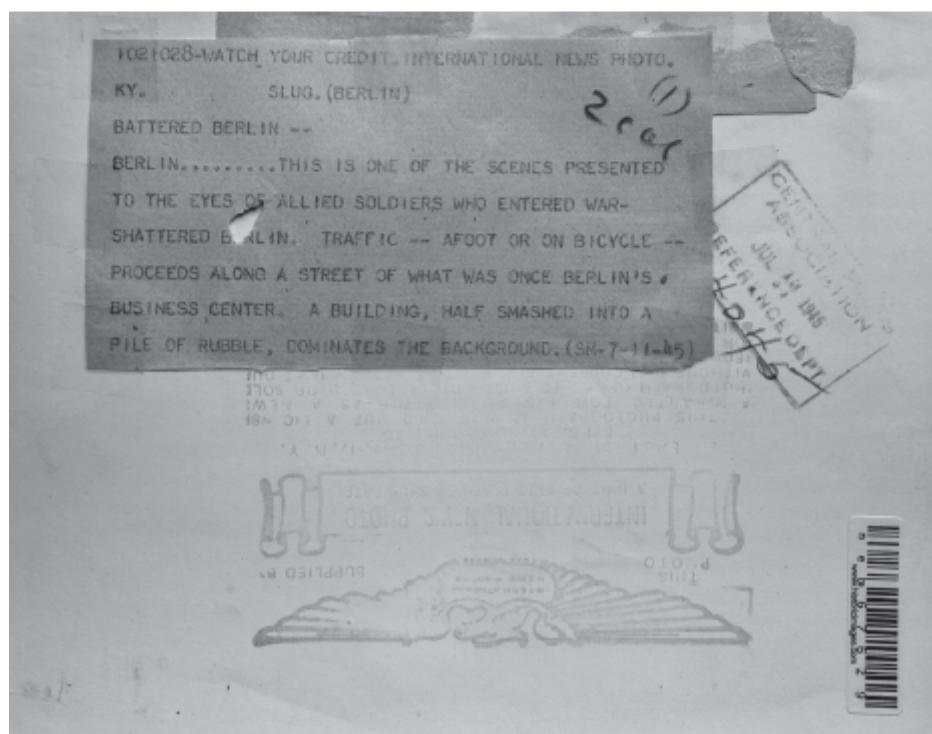


Fig. 3.17

“I’ve lost all concept of time,” the anonymous author of *Diary* wrote in a city from which the concept of space had already been evacuated.⁹² Thus, a photograph taken three months after the Allies entered the city, in which women are seen walking casually in the street and not as if they had just seen their first daylight after being forced to live for weeks as “cave dwellers,” is distributed as a representation of the scene the Allies first saw when they stopped bombing the city from above and entered it by foot. Weeks of terror simply do not exist in the time line of imperial powers’ news desks. Using Anonymous’s diary as an index for my reading of these photographs, I was able to relate to the photographic information along a different temporal axis. Thus, when photos capture the presence of well-dressed girls and women in open spaces, like in this “battered Berlin” photo, we should remind ourselves that these women are in a very early moment of experiencing anew the meaning of walking in their city without the threat of being violently captured and raped or forced to exchange their body for food. Furthermore, this photo should be described as a photo of a city from which the omnipresent threat of rape has been cleared so that survivors could become the consumers that the Marshall Plan required.

When the Allies walked into a Berlin that had just been heavily bombed and in which mass rape was pervasive, smoke was often still hanging in the air, while the streets were carpeted with rubble, dead bodies of people and of animals, and a few refugees on the run, carrying small bundles. These elements of destroyed worlds are registered in photos as part of the décor of the end of the war (see Fig. 3.18). I foreground them and interpret their presence, as well as their gradual evacuation, as markers in the time line of the mass rape that I reconstruct with Anonymous’s dairy. I do this in an attempt to undo the imperial time line that says wars are ended by peace agreements and by the restoration of the similar imperial regimes. When the Allied troops entered the city, the screams of women being raped or resisting rape could still be heard. Such sounds should be associated with images where the level of rubble and density of smoke are still high.



Fig. 3.18

This photo was taken some time in April (see Fig. 3.19). The exact date is unknown, as is the name of the photographer. When this photo by a Russian soldier was taken, some time after April 20 and not much earlier than May 9, rapes were still numerous. In the old print that I acquired, the caption in Russian reads: “The capital of the Third Reich after the storm.”⁹³ This is not a photo of a bombed city seen from above. It was most likely taken by a Russian infantry soldier from the ground.



Fig. 3.19

It is only on May 9 that Anonymous wrote in her diary that she was “alone between her sheets for the first time since April 27.”⁹⁴ The day before, with the help of some of their “protectors,” she and some other women were able to block the entrance of the building with a kind of door, and at that moment she wrote, “unless new troops are housed here, we begin a new life.”⁹⁵ The door restored, even if in a vulnerable way, some semblance of privacy, threshold, choice, and order.

In his book *On the Natural History of Destruction*, W. G. Sebald unproblematically reiterates imperial idioms of destruction even (or especially) as he laments the scarcity of accounts on this subject:

Even in later years, when local and amateur war historians began documenting the fall of German cities, their studies did not alter the fact that the images of this horrifying chapter of our history have never really crossed the threshold of the national consciousness.⁹⁶

The problem with destruction is not that its images did not yet cross the “national consciousness” (no less a rhetorical product of imperialism than those “battered cities”). After all, “national consciousness” consists precisely of such images and of their acceptability; hence it cannot be

transgressed or altered by what is recorded in these images. Unlearning the acceptability of this violence could only be achieved when the violence encoded in such photographs is recoded as unequivocally unacceptable. It is unlikely that Sebald did not know about the mass rape of German women in this mesmerizing décor of destruction, or about the controversy in Germany (such as after the screening of Helke Sander's film in 1992) every time women sought to publicly raise the issue of those rapes and how they were silenced, as if their pain, or the numerous children to whom they gave birth after being raped, children who live in Germany, simply did not exist and should not exist.

Contrary to the impression Sebald creates in his book, photos such as the ones he included were never banned from circulation, nor were they unknown to Germans who collected, traded, printed, and exchanged them in different forms, including postcards. The “absence” of images discussed by Sebald is inseparable from the excess of images that renders Sebald's use of them a reprint rather than a first exposure. Sebald elides the meaning of reprinting something that was in high circulation and negligently continues to conflate reprinting with “unearthing.” Thus, these reprinted images continually fail to be informed by the experiences of those for whom the destroyed cities were never separate from other violence. These reprinted images reiterate what the Allies wanted people to see in them: “battered cities” or “destroyed cities.” Sebald is attentive to the movement of refugees, “numbering one and a quarter million, dispersed all over the Reich, as far as its outer borders,”⁹⁷ but oblivious to what happened to them on the roads, in the woods, in the refuges they found in their homes, or along the way in tattered buildings.

When photos of catastrophe are not studied, but merely made into tokens of destruction or exposure, women's time, shaped by rape and evaporated from shared time—but still registered in elements such as the density of smoke, the height of rubble, the latter's position in the entrance to a building, women's grimaces, their features, neglected clothes—appears as insignificant compared with the larger natural history of destruction. When imperial violence is made into ether, such details become helpful in making it palpable again.

Visual documents of rape are not missing: this is just another cliché rooted in the imperial fusion of perpetrators' points of view with neutral facts. Visual documents of violence perpetrated in the open cannot be missing; they should be located within available images that are falsely declared not to be images of rape, even though they were taken in the same place and at the same time as the rapes (see Fig. 3.18). Since the mass rape mainly took place within a few weeks, from the invasion of the city to the reconstruction of order through separations between inside/outside, private/public, work/nonwork, road/pavement, entrance/exit, and so on, I suggest replacing the vague temporal marker—the year 1945, written indistinctly on the back of many of the photos and used in the titles of dozens

of books published in the last decade alone—with a more precise time line based on a careful reading of changes in the cityscape and its dwellers.

Inserted in such a reconstructed time line, this photo can no longer be read as another photo of destruction (see Fig. 3.19). *This is a photo of an arena of rape.* In these perforated and porous dwellings, women, children, and the elderly lived with no windows, no doors, no water, no gas, no electricity, and very little food. They moved from the upper floors to basements and up again, depending on the intuitive and rumor-data they could gather on the behavior of their rapists. Some of the rapists, they learned, were too lazy to climb to the upper floors, especially when drunk; others felt less comfortable raping women in crowded places like basements, where people stayed after the aerial bombing, since their apartments were made uninhabitable. Young girls in particular hid in closets and other less accessible parts of what was left of their or others' homes. “Yes, girls are a commodity increasingly in short supply. Now everyone's ready when the men go on the hunt for women, so they lock up their girls, hide them in the crawl spaces, pack them off to secure apartments” Anonymous writes.⁹⁸

Some of the women managed to reduce the number of men who raped them by making deals with individual soldiers, who would protect them from others and, in exchange for access to these women's bodies, provide some food.

The apartment is open to a few friends of the house, if that's what they can be called, as well as to the men Anatol brings from his platoon, and no one else. It seems that I really am taboo, at least for today.⁹⁹

The rubble that blocked buildings' entrances did not stand in the way of those who came to rape women. On the contrary, the chase after women was part of the adventure:

I draw back to the passage that leads to our basement, then sneak to the inner courtyard, but just when I think I've shaken him he's standing next to me, and slips into the basement along with me. He shines his flashlight on the faces, some forty people altogether, pausing each time he comes to a woman, letting the pool of light flicker for several seconds on her face.¹⁰⁰

Even though the buildings were not secure, women still preferred to stay in them rather than going outside among the predators. The deserted street in this photo clearly indicates this. Only the central part of the road is relatively cleared of rubble, and only two or three soldiers are seen walking there.

What exactly is this photo? Who took it, and why? It does not seem like the dead corpse of the horse, still attached to the damaged carriage, attracted the photographer; nor did the scale of the destruction, as is clearly the case in other photos. In this image, the photographer's gaze is closer and more intimate. If this photo was taken in order to show the building or the street, another street or

another angle may have been taken. It seems more like an idiosyncratic souvenir the photographer wanted to carry with him. He would have been familiar with this particular building: he probably knew how to get in and out of each of its holes and wanted to keep some memories of the many evenings and nights he spent there with one woman or maybe many, first having to “grab her wrists,” “jerk her around the corridor,” and “pull her, hand on her throat, so she can no longer scream,”¹⁰¹ and later providing some vodka, herring, candles, and cigarettes before or after he raped her. At this point food rations were either nonexistent or minimal enough to force women to choose a sort of rape-under-control in the form of a food-for-sex exchange, in the place of other forms of rape. The photographer might be a man like the one described by Anonymous: “For out of all the male beasts I’ve seen these past few days he’s the most bearable, the best of the lot.”¹⁰² But he may be another one. There are no existing statistics, but many women preferred to shelter themselves from multiple gang rapes in these types of relationships. These men became friends, of sorts, welcomed insofar as they could prevent foreigners from intruding and raping the women even more brutally. Even if this particular photo was not taken by Petka, Anatol, the Major, or Vanya, it was taken by another soldier from a proximity threatening for women who, at the very moment the photo was taken, were hiding in violated houses.

No Silences in the Archive: Mass Rape and World War II

Two days after Anonymous’s April 1945 entry, the writer Marguerite Duras, still unaware of the fate of her husband Robert Antelme, for whom she had been waiting in their Paris apartment since he was deported for his participation in the resistance, wrote in her diary: “There have been twenty-seven air raid alerts in Berlin in the last twenty-four hours.” In sharp contrast to the celebration of Berlin’s destruction in news reports—“Germany has been beaten to a pulp”—Duras wrote in her diary, “Berlin is in flames. Millions of civilians are fleeing,” and “millions of men are awaiting the final consummation.”¹⁰³

Rather than following Charles de Gaulle’s declaration, “the days of weeping are over, the days of glory have returned,” Duras used her diary to make these words sound like “criminal words.” “We shall never forgive,” she states, using a nonpatriotic “we” of those cocitizens: “At this moment the people are paying. He doesn’t notice. The people are made for paying. Berlin is burning. The German people are paying. That’s normal. The people, a generality.”¹⁰⁴ It is not the Germans as individuals, whose regime mobilized them as perpetrators, to whom she denies forgiveness. Duras makes this clear when she sides with a freed French prisoner who brought a German orphan with him to Paris

and “was arrogating to himself the right to forgive, to absolve, already.” Rather, Duras denies forgiveness to statesmen, including those of the Allied powers, whose priorities were free of concern for the people, or were directed against the people, as de Gaulle implied when he claimed, “The dictatorship of popular sovereignty entails risks that must be tempered by the responsibility of one man.”¹⁰⁵

“No national day for the dead deportees,” she writes with fury regarding the national day of mourning de Gaulle declared after the death of President Roosevelt. De Gaulle’s main concern, Duras contends, was the size, wealth, and power of his empire’s overseas territories: he “has always put his North African Front before his political deportees,” she wrote. Indeed, one month later, on May 8, 1945, the official day when World War II was ended in Europe, the massacre of tens of thousands of Algerians at Sétif, Kharata, and Guelma would make it all the more clear what de Gaulle’s priorities were. For him, governed peoples with political aspirations were no more than a military front. De Gaulle never seemed to think about the danger to which people are exposed by the dictatorship of statesmen.

Tormented by the bellicose language in the media—repetitions of the language of military and political leaders violently crafting a new world order as a liberation from the totalitarian one—Duras filled her diary with mesmerizing cries and concrete descriptions like “Berlin is burning.” German cities were systematically destroyed, but, as Duras wrote, it was not simply architecture that was ruined but fabrics of life: “There are still some people alive there.” Photos, taken from bomber planes, featured aerial patterns of abstracted destruction. Duras didn’t have to view photographs of corpses in order to understand the meaning of “beaten to a pulp” to refuse media rhetoric and its archival categorizations and side with the people. She insisted on being a cocitizen with them.

As early as 1941, the Allies wrote the Atlantic Charter to guarantee that their imperial power would continue to rule the world. There was no question that it would be a political formation of differentially governed populations. The process of ending World War II involved transforming imperial leaders into rescuers whose violence, protected with impunity by the international laws and treaties that they crafted, enabled them to posit their power as the sole alternative to totalitarian regimes like those of Germany and Japan. A popular axiom held that Germans had to pay for Nazis’ crimes, and women, for their part, had to relearn the lesson of rule by men, regardless of the regime to which these men belonged. The possibility that, in the political vacuum created by destruction, women suspected that the same old order hid beneath the guise of the new order, and would aspire to establish another polity amid the ruins, had to be eradicated.

Hearing the daily bombing reports in April 1945, Duras clung to an image etched into her mind months earlier: “I think of the German mother of the little sixteen-year-old soldier who lay dying on August 17, 1944, alone on the heap of stones on the Quai des Arts” (see Fig. 3.21). Throughout her diary, Duras rejects the linear order of the archive that commands her to alternately mourn and burst with joy with her own people; she opens up a space in which it is permissible to grieve for others: mourning with the German mother, while being a French woman under German occupation, awaiting her deported husband. Could she have known that this same German mother or her female relatives would become victims of mass rape? I assume not. Had she stumbled upon this fact, she would probably have decried it in her diary, just as she mourned a dead German soldier, or the French women—*les femmes tondues*—whose clothes were torn and heads were shaved as public punishment for their wartime relationships with German soldiers. These images informed portions of Duras’s script for Alain Resnais’s film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, in which the tropes of a differential body politic and national loyalty are identified as imperial tools for mobilizing people to partake in sanctioned, gendered violence against their cocitizens.



Fig. 3.20



Fig. 3.21

Duras's script radically defies the differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate violence that the Allies imposed and instead asks which forms of violence were disavowed by the archival regime or were publicly perpetrated but called "liberation" or "justice." This disavowal was not just formal censorship, though the Allies deployed this, too (for example, by forbidding Japanese people from taking photographs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the American occupation of Japan).¹⁰⁶ But as I've argued throughout, destruction and violence at this scale were not concealed, only reconfigured. Visual records of the erasure of Japanese cities and their populations were featured in *Life* magazine. The destruction of a city and its habitants was not censored. Photos of cities "before" and "after" their devastation were classified as visual markers of a mission accomplished, with articles given such titles as "The War Ends: Burst of Atomic Bomb Brings Swift Surrender of Japanese."

In Duras's script and Alain Resnais's film the same events appeared for what they were: violence, without distance, masquerade, or mercy for either the victims or the perpetrators. This informative and intimate portrayal of what remains out in the open when the "mission is accomplished" rejects perpetrators' claims to factual truth. Such factuality is often enchanted by the imaginary effect of censorship rather than the revelation of censorship's fictionality. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* deliberately refrains from letting such large-scale violence overshadow the personal—though no less political—violence suffered by individual women like the film's protagonist, who was engaged in a nationally forbidden love story. The film suggests that it is precisely in Hiroshima, a city whose entire population was punished, that a French woman could articulate the harm she experienced in the French city of Nevers, where she herself belonged to a segment of the population that was also permitted to be punished. The stable national divisions that define enmity and facilitate the transition

from violence into victory are destabilized in the script and the film, and the ground of national belonging trembles.

Did Duras physically encounter, in the archive or the newspaper, an image of a woman whose hair was cut as a punishment, or an image of a dead German soldier (see Fig. 3.21)? Duras may have known this 1944 photograph of an unidentified soldier's corpse in Strasbourg, by Henri Cartier-Bresson, who, together with Duras, was involved with the journal *Libres*, dedicated to the liberation of prisoners of war and deportees. The dead body was left on the dock uncovered and exposed to Cartier-Bresson's camera—an unlikely situation for a French soldier. Since it was her aim to radically revise the repertoire of images depicting wartime violence by incorporating what was purposefully left out, Duras would have been attentive to stories of the systemic rape of German women (or, on a much smaller scale, that of French women during the liberation), had any been available.¹⁰⁷

The presence of mass rape and its meanings in historical narratives, public discourse, policies concerning redistribution of services and wealth, and the political imaginary have been overlooked because of a “lack of public interest” in the places where it occurred. However, such a large-scale catastrophe cannot ever be erased from the annals; instead, it can be, and indeed was, renarrated: as Atina Grossman writes, the rapes

became an official problem located in the public sphere because they had social health and population political consequences that required medical intervention: venereal disease and pregnancy. They were immediately coded as public issues, not as an experience of violent sexual assault, but as a social and medical problem that needed to be resolved.¹⁰⁸

The responses to the publication of Anonymous's diary in the mid-1950s, as well as the responses to Helke Sander's film on the same topic, *Liberators Take Liberties* in the mid-1990s, were virulent. In response to her critics, Anonymous asked her publisher not to reprint the text until after her death.¹⁰⁹ The persistent resistance to addressing mass rape as systemic wartime violence with structural political implications continues to deny the crime against German women and colludes with the recurrence of similar violence against women in other political regimes.

In her discussion of Sander's film, Atina Grossmann, who identifies herself as a child of German Jewish refugees, argues that

we need to ask how the (eventually privately transmitted and publicly silenced) collective experience of rape of German women in the absence of (protective) German men insinuated itself into postwar

Germans' view of themselves as primarily "victims" and not "agents" of National Socialism and war. The mass rape of 1945 inscribed indelibly in many German women's memory a sullen conviction of their own victimization and their superiority over the vanquisher who came to liberate them.¹¹⁰

The tendency to transform people into tokens of their nation, and to relate the violence to which they are exposed (or which they exercise) to the nation to which they belong, did not start with World War II but was certainly one of its frightening successes. The massacre of as many as 45,000 Algerians on the day when World War II officially ended in Europe, or that of the Senegalese soldiers held in the camp of Thiaroye after being released from fighting with the French against the Nazis, are two stunning examples of the victory of the binary opposition created by the Allies to distinguish their mechanisms of violence from those used by totalitarian regimes of the Axis powers. The spectacular violence of the Allies led to the reimposition of differential body politics all over the world. A differential body politic is a necessary condition to guarantee that violence will be unequally experienced by different groups either acknowledged or denied, because the archival category of violence depends on who exercises it and against whom.

Against this backdrop, Duras's insistence on expanding the repertoire of World War II images of violence is inseparable from her attempt to refuse impunity to perpetrators of violence. In her role as cocitizen, she never forecloses the possibility of forgiveness.¹¹¹ It is a call to face and acknowledge the place of violence in European imperial history, even as the Allies, while continuing to perpetrate violence, enjoyed impunity by claiming to rescue victims from the violence of the others. "We are of the same race as those who were burned in the crematoriums, those who were gassed at Maidanek," Duras writes. But, she continues, "We're also of the same race as the Nazis." Her insistence throughout the diary that we should not be particularly horrified by the Nazis' crimes is not to claim that the crimes are not horrifying. They are. But are they more horrifying than previous or later crimes committed by those posing as rescuers?

Duras is completely aware of the main feature of imperial crimes: their capacity not to appear as such. Employed in 1940 at the Ministère des Colonies after graduating from university, Duras coauthored (with Philippe Roques) the book *L'Empire Français*.¹¹² Only when (or perhaps it was why) she quit the job could she view the data she gathered for the book through a different, nonimperial, lens. By expanding the World War II repertoire of violence, Duras insists on her right to respond to and be affected by these crimes outside of the discursive regime that differentiated between legitimate and illegitimate violence and designated certain people as mournable victims (to use Judith Butler's term) while others are not, and divided perpetrators into those who must be punished and those who have impunity.¹¹³

Duras's refusal to follow the imperial scripted distribution of violence defied the archival regime of the post-World War II world. Even if the majority of rapes were perpetrated by Red Army soldiers in the Soviet zone, soldiers of the other occupying armies also perpetrated many of them, and the tight daily cooperation among Allied forces makes them responsible also for the naturalization and decriminalization of this systemic violence.¹¹⁴ Rather than standing against this violence and using the term *rape* to name a crime, the occupying powers conflated violence with sex and love—a private matter with public violence—by using “fraternization” as an umbrella term through which to regulate the relation between men and women (see Fig. 3.22). This is encapsulated in this photo, dated negligently with just the year (1945) and titled, half-ironically, “Frat-non-Frat,” implying jokingly that there are forms of being with German women that are “not-frat.”¹¹⁵ Thus, the US Army fraternization rules regarding contact with German women colonized the language of what was in reality systemic rape, even if the GIs were responsible for “only” 11,000 cases of rape, according to one account.¹¹⁶ The somewhat ridiculous fraternization regulations became a common joke between men in the different parts of occupied Berlin, who competed with one another and were ready to learn from one another, as the photo caption makes clear they did: “G.I.s stand by to take a lesson in fraternization from one of their Russian allies as he goes out walking with a German Girl friend [sic] in Berlin.”

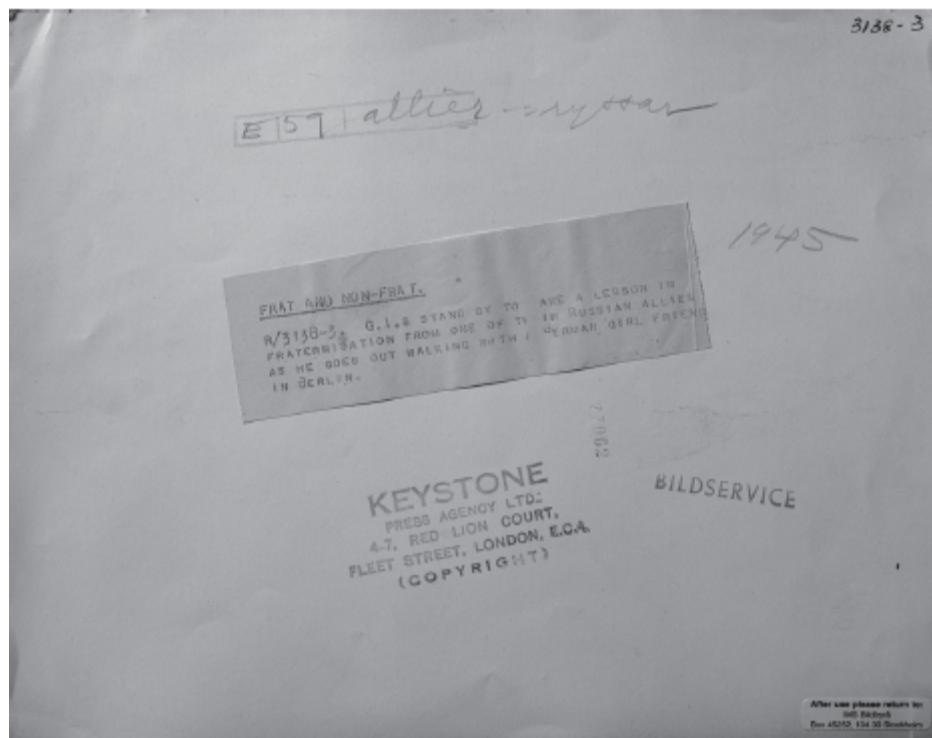


Fig. 3.22

Those women who succeeded in avoiding rape, or its recurrence, found themselves outside of any of these providential economies. City dumping lots were rare places where women could find food (see Fig. 3.23). The black market economy was manipulated to authorize certain people to provide them with food and to ensure that women were not creating their own markets with their own rules.

When Anonymous met with her friend in May, this was their exchange: “‘How many times were you raped, Ilse?’ ‘Four, and you?’ ‘No idea, I had to work up the ranks from supply train to major.’”¹¹⁷ Under these conditions, four times could not have been enough for surviving. Not much could be found in a nearby dumping lot, either. Anonymous noted “the people going hungry” in mid-May, after another friend of hers biked a two-hour distance to ask for some food. “She herself looks pitiful; a piece of bacon. Her legs are sticks and her knees jut out like gnarled bumps.”¹¹⁸

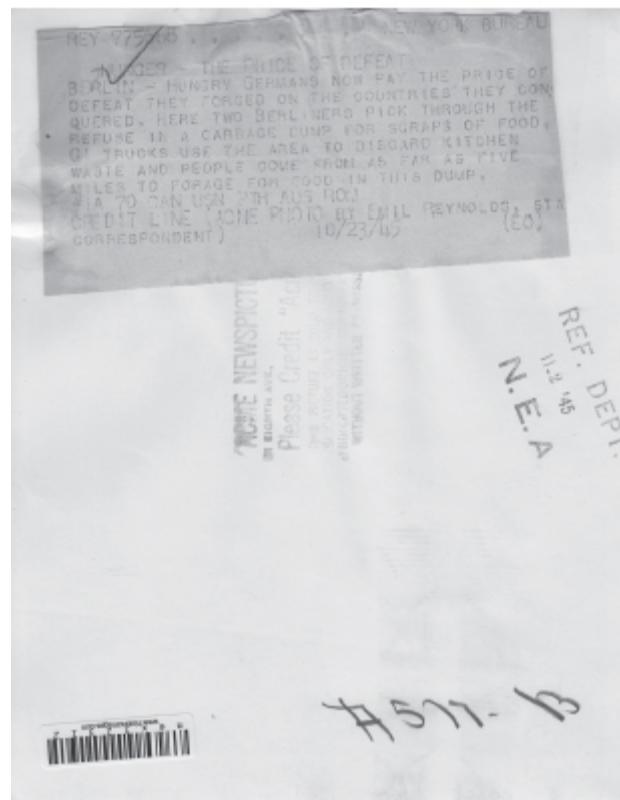


Fig. 3.23

Given this situation, when we look again at the photo of “battered Berlin,” (see [figure 3.17](#)) it is clear that the building in its background could stand as a distinct object on a pedestal, only due to the tedious labor that unraveled the bright sidewalk from underneath the rubble. I propose to place on the same reconstructed time line of rape the numerous photos (now online) of pretty women cleaning,

recycling blocks, removing rubble, handing over buckets, holding hands, and smiling to the camera, in order not to confine to oblivion the way in which German women were treated—rubble-women, before they were transformed into “rubble women,” an icon of the reconstruction of Germany by female laborers. On May 22, Anonymous writes, “At around 2 p.m. we heard loud shouting from down on the street outside our house: all men and women capable of work and currently unemployed should report to the Rathaus [town hall] at once for labor duty.”¹¹⁹ From then on, food is proposed in exchange for labor: “Word went around that we were to be fed.”¹²⁰

Does this mean that the rapes are over? Forced labor didn’t put an end to rape, but it did mark a transition away from the rape-food economy: “I am essentially living off my body, trading it for something to eat.”¹²¹ The women “shoveled diligently,” according to Anonymous’s description of the first workday under Russian supervision.

All of a sudden around ten o’clock we heard some shouting, and a Russian voice: “Woman, come! Woman, come!” A command that’s been all too popular. In a flash all the women disappeared, hiding behind doors, crawling under carts and piles of rubble, squatting to make themselves as small as possible.
¹²²

After the “end” of the war, food provisions and produced shortages were used in tandem as a form of rule in Germany (see Fig. 3.24). The regime of food shortage lasted only a few years, and it was not on the scale of the great famine produced in India at this time, but was familiar to Germans—with their own imperial past—as the imperial condition inflicted on others in far-away colonies: “We are nothing but a colony, subject to their whims.”¹²³



Fig. 3.24

Needless to say, this “plenty,” provided in exchange for women’s bodies, was inseparable from the economy of looting. This economy comprised both the overt and orchestrated looting by the Allies, who confiscated whatever they needed, and the more sporadic, survivalist theft by women, which was tolerated by individual soldiers: “People no longer feel so closely tied to things; they no longer distinguish clearly between their own property and that of others.”¹²⁴ Chaos and anarchy filled the governmental vacuum left by the dismantling of the Nazi state, which had started a few days before the Allied conquest of Berlin and Hitler’s suicide (see Fig. 3.26). Look at this moment of joy when a stock of liquor was found. Rather than sharing it clandestinely among a handful of people who would accumulate the surplus, they share it with all who share their misery, and celebrate their opportunity to provide for themselves without having to give their bodies in exchange (see Fig. 3.25). Look at these joyful women when they try on a stash of found hats. At this point they are in the woods, running away, hiding. In a few weeks, when women will be back on the streets, “hustling and bustling about,” Anonymous will write in her diary: “I even spotted one woman wearing a hat, the first I think I’ve seen in a long time.”¹²⁵

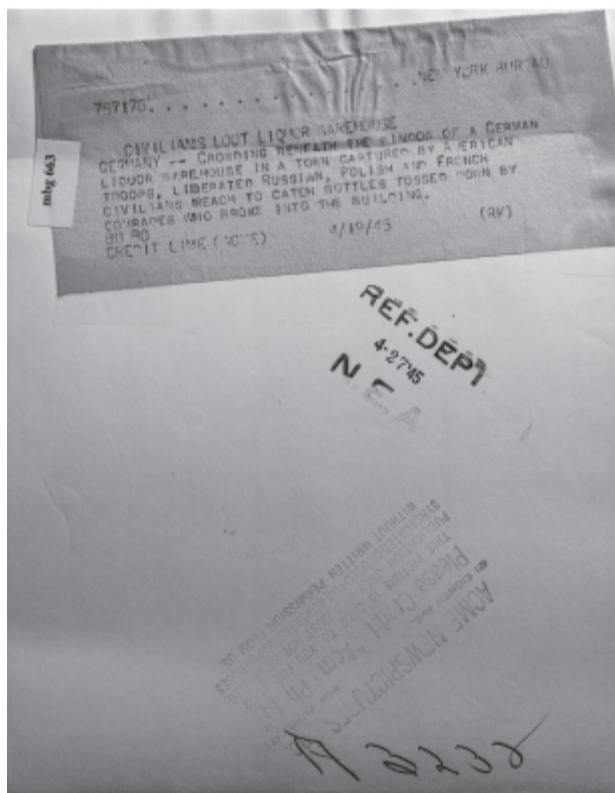


Fig. 3.25

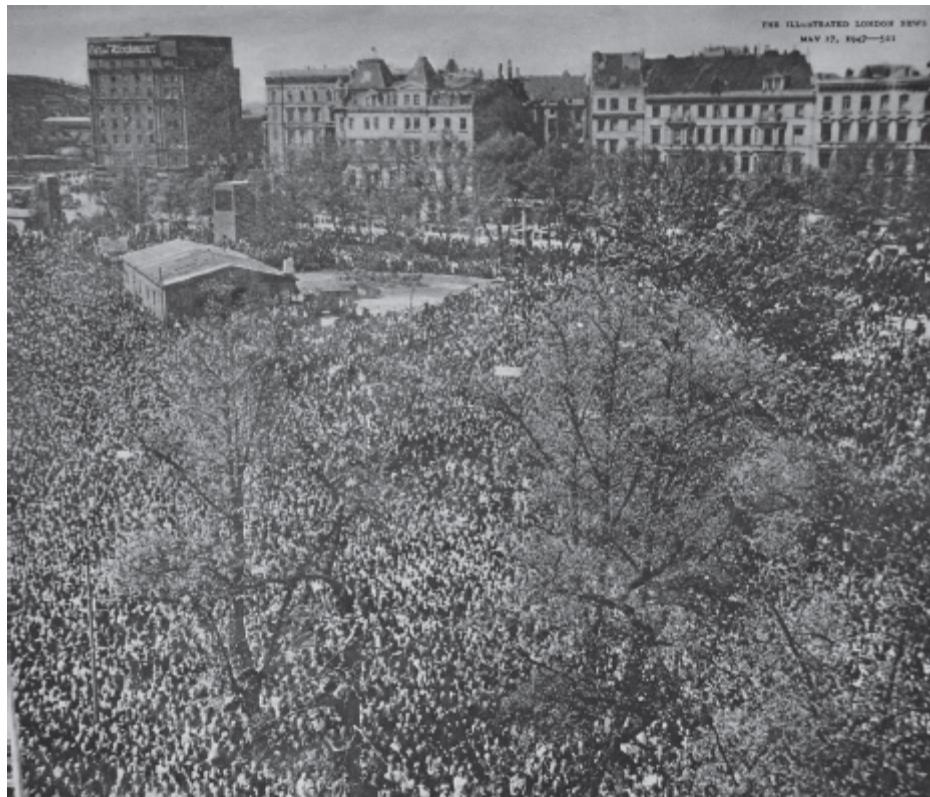


Fig.3.26

Through food shortages, the new regime sought to obtain acknowledgement: “We’re being governed again; those in power are providing for us” (see Fig. 3.27).¹²⁶ A clearer distinction was introduced between permitted looting—implemented from above as policy—and forbidden looting, including other forms of trading food, mainly through black markets initiated by citizens outside of the governing apparatuses. Admittedly, it did not take place without many protests and strikes, including hunger strikes, which lasted for a couple of years in all the occupied zones of Berlin. “To alleviate the scarcity of food in the German capital, American, British and Canadian army trucks have been bringing potatoes and other hard-to-get commodities into the city,” reads the caption of a photo distributed by an American agency (see Fig. 3.28). A caption on the back of a photo “radioed from Moscow” reads: “Russians bring food to battered Berlin to feed the hungry, war-battered citizens of Berlin. Sacks piled up in foreground contain flour and sugar. It will be distributed to Berlin stores and thence redistributed to the public” (see Fig. 3.29). When both photos (taken in mid-May) in which people were invited to recognize order and governmentality are put side by side, the division of labor between East and West is overshadowed by that between men in uniform and women in dresses. The men provide the food while the women stand in line, grateful for not being left to starve and maybe also less exposed to rape.

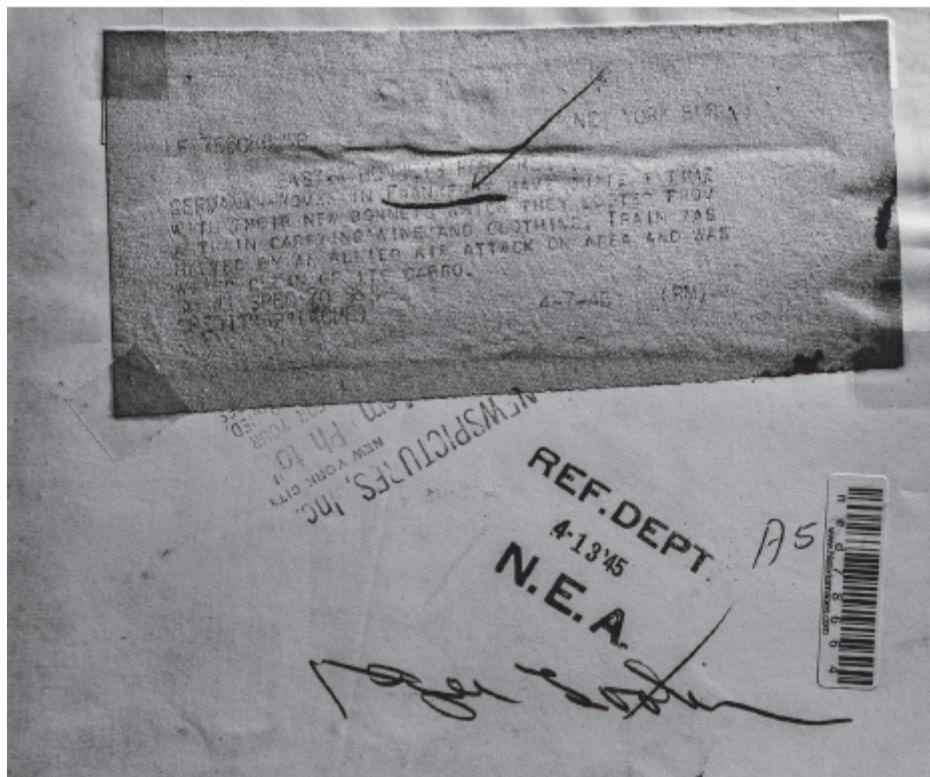


Fig. 3.27

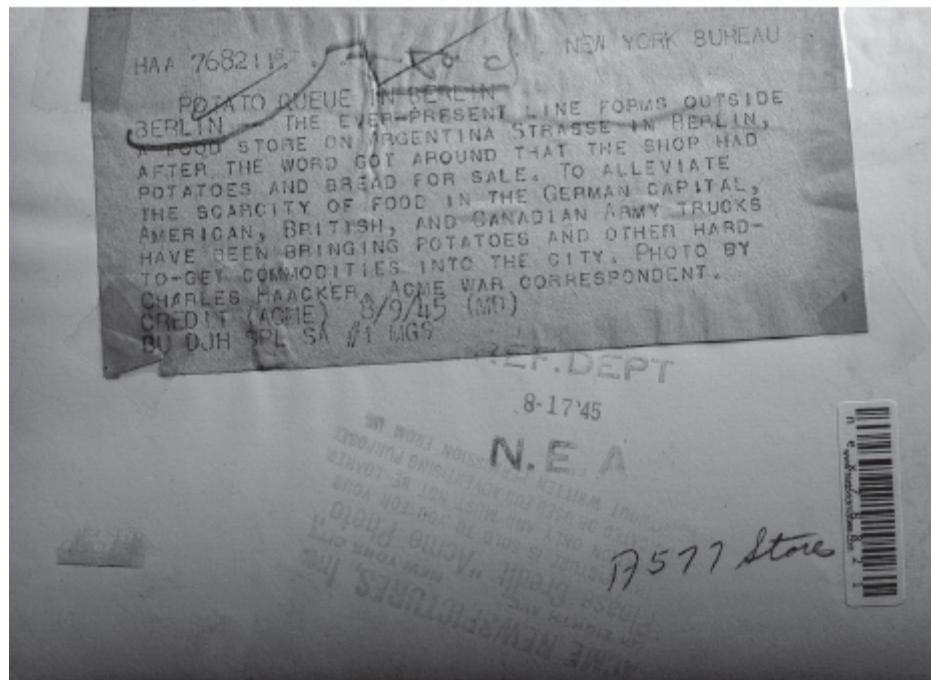


Fig. 3.28

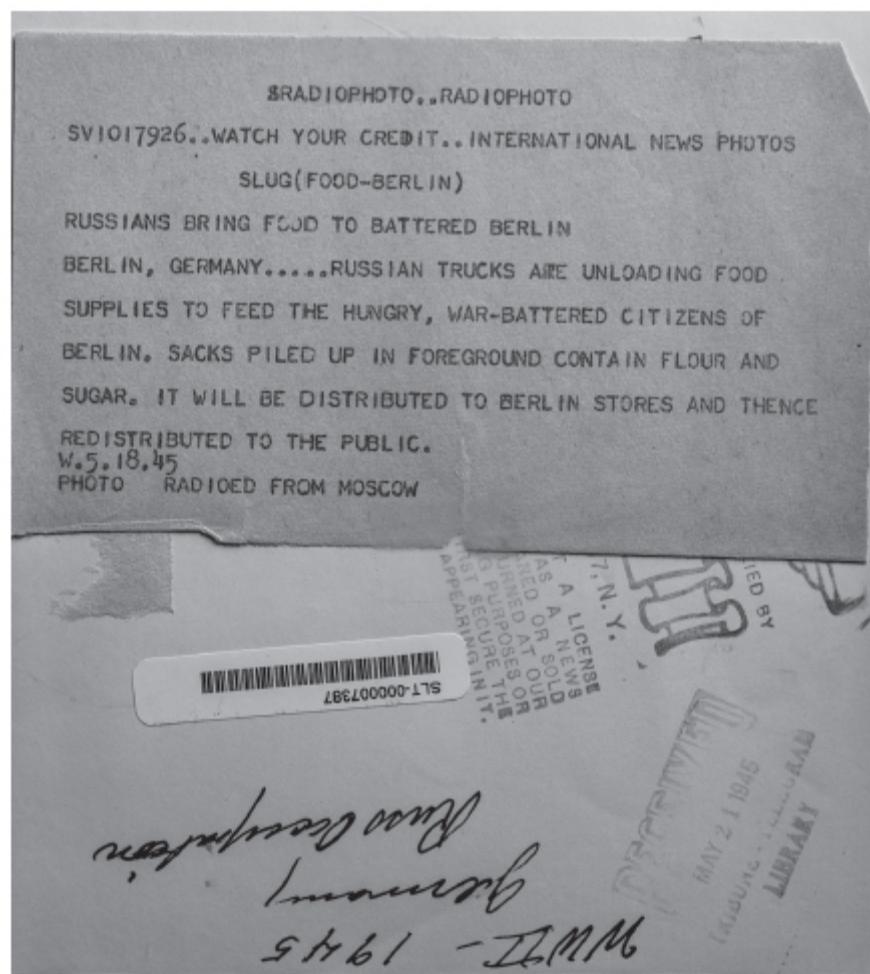


Fig. 3.29

At the end of World War II, women were already made citizens in many places where the possibility that they would equally participate in shaping the world with men was out of the question. When we refuse the archival imperative to look for rape in the photos, and reject the common axioms about the absence of records of rape in these photographs and archives, we start to apprehend

violence against women as a widespread phenomenon that should be studied on its mass scale. It emerges as the foundational imprint of patriarchal order on women's bodies in the process of implementing a "new world order."¹²⁷ I propose to see the imprint of patriarchal order on women's bodies during the final stages of World War II, and the implementation of a "new world order" after its end, as inseparable from the archival process of categorizing imperial governance with the neutral political language of unqualified terms—*sovereignty, citizenship, democracy, peace*, instead of *curfews, raids, body searches, arrests, rapes*. International law was codified and standardized to endorse these concepts and structures as incarnations of transcendental political categories, culminating with the creation of the UN as an apparatus that contains imperial violence within the realm of law and order.

The Infiltrator Doesn't Exist: Palestine, 1948

The second case of a challenge to photographic archives is the figure of the "infiltrator" (*mistanen* in Hebrew), known in the US context as "illegal." The Hebrew term is constitutive of the state of Israel and was shaped to target Palestinians who sought to return to their homes following their expulsion.¹²⁸ The border is meant to hide that the law was shaped against the rightful claim of Palestinians to return to the place from which they were deported. In the border, the category of "infiltrator" is made visually legible to security agents who read in it a set of instructions—interrogate, arrest, harass, expel, or execute—that also became legible to citizens. The violence these agents exercise against those who were until recently living in the same place, their cocitizens, eventually produced masses of archival documents that scholars are invited to explore as sources for the study of "infiltrators," thus becoming complicit in the factuality of the category itself. The archive lures citizen-scholars into complying with the imperative to look for infiltrators *in* photographs and documents, where their images, manners, habits, and modes of infiltration can be studied carefully.

Unlearning the legibility of the category of the "infiltrator" as an object of knowledge in which citizens can specialize, means to be able to claim—against the archive's interpellation to acknowledge the contrary—that the infiltrator does not exist. In the company of my Palestinian companion, the call directed at Israeli Jewish citizens to recognize Palestinians *in* the documents dealing with infiltrators cannot be brought to completion. It cannot be completed because it is not about granting him a right to return to stolen land as an expression of progress, generosity, or

humanitarianism, but about unlearning the temporality of the imperial archive and recognizing his refusal to be expelled as a refusal that preceded the creation of the state and never ceased to exist after its creation.

The infiltrator does not exist. This is an onto-political assertion that the archive cannot confirm or refute, since the archive is the site par excellence where infiltrators are fabricated against their will. The presence in the archive of photographs that are classified under this title—“infiltrators”—is not a proof of the existence of infiltrators but rather of the archive’s crime. They can no longer be read as representations of existing infiltrators, but rather trigger a different question: what are the photographic and archival conditions for the fabrication of the infiltrator? To unlearn the infiltrator as an object of knowledge that can be tracked down in documents means studying the violence that produces the archival category and that continues to shape its relationship with the citizen and enables and participates in the category’s fabrication.

Exploring some images, taken between 1948 and 1955 in Palestine as it was transformed into Israel, will help us question further the meanings of working in a state archive whose imperial crimes are not yet settled and whose direct victims are not yet allowed free entrance and access to the archive, as they are physically kept outside of the borders of the state where these archives are located. It’s time to recognize that the citizenship we have been given against others is not an achievement but a curse and a burden. We should have the right to stand against the violence perpetrated by our ancestors because some of our ancestors betrayed other members of their communities who were also our ancestors. In the life of a community not crafted on imperial and capitalist principles, ancestors are those who preserve the world and care for it, and not those who fit racial, gender, and national schemes. We should contest the right, that a minority of founders acquired for themselves, to differentiate people from others with whom they are governed and to delegate to their descendants the continuance of this legacy. We should refuse to play the role of perpetrators and instead become cocitizens in a common world. Palestine is a symptom of this deadly pact of citizenship. Undoing the category “infiltrator” with those who were forced to embody it teaches us the contrary: Palestine can still be a source of hope, hope for the entire world.

The story of the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948–49 (out of which the category of the “infiltrator” was born) is today relatively well known. However, we still have to remind ourselves that mass expulsion does not occur miraculously at once, but is rather a long process through which the local population is divided and the body politic reorganized to accommodate differentially those who were made into “citizens,” “refugees,” and (as soon as they resisted) “infiltrators.”

The expulsion began in early 1948, just a few months after the UN voted for the partition plan and continued after the state of Israel was established. However, it never ended. Not only because of new acts of local transfer (for example, in Jerusalem or the Jordan Valley), but also because whenever a Palestinian attempts to return, he or she is either executed or expelled anew. Israeli citizenship is predicated on the delegitimation of the Palestinian return claims. When the sovereignty of the state of Israel was declared and was internationally recognized, only 250,000 of the 750,000 were expelled. However, the approach to the processes of expulsion of Palestinians was replaced by and reduced to the approach to “refugees,” as if all Palestinians are refugees—even before being expelled. During the same time period and resulting from that same sovereign act, a smaller number of Jews were made citizens. The subtraction of the majority of Palestinians from the body politic of cocitizens who lived in Palestine and the differential rule of the minority that was left enabled the creation of Jewish sovereignty and its detachment from the fate of the expellees. When those expellees reject this sovereign logic, they are criminalized as “infiltrators.”

The soldier-narrator in the already-discussed novel *Khirbet Khize* describes the following:

[The] operational order number such and such, on such and such day of the month, in the margin of which, in the final section that was simply entitled “miscellaneous,” it said, in a short line and a half [...] and that one couldn’t evaluate this straightforward final clause before returning to the opening and also scanning the noteworthy clause entitled “information,” which immediately warned of the mounting danger of “infiltrators,” “terrorist cells,” and (in a wonderful turn of phrase) “operatives dispatched on hostile missions,” and the even more noteworthy clause, which explicitly stated, “assemble the inhabitants of the area.”¹²⁹

Between 1948 and 1956, approximately 70,000 Palestinians crossed the border back into what became Israel, without government sanction.¹³⁰ Disrupting imperial transmission is our duty once we understand that from the very moment Jews in Palestine were ordered to expel Palestinians, they were ordered, “in a wonderful turn of phrase,” to prevent their return.

The return of Palestinians to Palestine is a daily occurrence that should not be omitted from the operation of imperial shutters. As soon as the shutter opens to be closed again, they are there, making its operation less smooth than it claims it to be and undermining its attempt to relegate them once and forever to a bygone past.

Refusing to discover them *in the past*, I turn to images that were deliberately left uncensored and authorized to be printed and that persist in a present continuous temporality (see Fig. 3.30). “Here was I born, and here will I be buried,” we read Halim Ramadan telling the investigator at the police station upon his arrest in 1950, after having clandestinely crossed the border into Israel and having been

detained by soldiers (on the left hand side of the newspaper's double spread). He was quoted in an article in *Ha'Olam Ha'ze*, a journal openly critical of the Israeli government (not the regime). The headline asks, "How are infiltrators expelled?" Instead of an answer, a large photo is printed in which Palestinians are lined up, in front of a firing squad. Whatever empathy was shown by the magazine staff toward the refugee, and shocked as the editor may have been at the army's conduct, Halim Ramadan's demand to return to his home did not manage to shake the spatial conception imposed by differential sovereignty in May 1948, leaving the majority of Palestinians out. In the 1950s, Israeli citizens—journalists or editors—were already interpellated to identify themselves with the sovereign position and to repeat it as their own, unaware that their moral stance is necessarily compromised by this position. *Ha'Olam Ha'ze* opined:

No state can tolerate armed persons nightly crossing its borders—let alone persons bent on robbery. Be their personal tragedy as it may, the state must protect the lives and property of its inhabitants. Those soldiers and policemen who do this job deserve all of our thanks.¹³¹



Fig. 3.30

The criticism implicit in the title ("How are infiltrators expelled?") is aimed at soldiers who take the law in their hands and exert excessive violence to deter refugees. "Infiltration is a plague upon the State," writes a journalist in the most radical Jewish periodical of its time. "We shall not prevent it by sporadic initiatives," he continues, "We can reduce it by more effective warfare [...] However, a final solution to this problem can only be found by distancing the Arab refugees from our borders and rehabilitating them."¹³²

Clearly, these are not snapshots. In the best tradition of reportage, it seems that the photographer was allowed to join the soldiers and could take the time to meticulously compose each frame. If this exposure indeed meant to provoke a scandal regarding the army's conduct, why was the photographer allowed to come along and why did the the Israeli Military Censor, who watches over the publication of information regarding the military and has the authority to suppress information and who at the time was working around the clock, not do his job? Nor does the periodical say that until 1955, infiltration was not a violent phenomenon and that the Palestinians who were executed were nonviolent "infiltrators." The reporter implies that infiltrators endanger the state's inhabitants and that therefore it is a sovereign state's duty to stop them in order to protect its citizens. The criticism, acute as it might sound, is already made from within the sovereign differentiation between citizen and noncitizen, out of which the figure of the "infiltrator" could exist without scandal. Thus, the state-sponsored radical Jewish editor can repeat the regime's message with a critical tone of voice, and be blind to the violence exerted upon him, turning him unknowingly into the regime's spokesman.

This form of violence, exerted on privileged citizens, is an understudied major trait of differential sovereignty. It causes citizens to conceive of themselves in a differentiated, not shared, world. They are expected to preserve this order that differentiates them so naturally from others, and they are encouraged to play the moral subject with respect to the others. The editor exercised his duty without wondering why his newspaper's photographer was allowed to be there, invited by the army to this border through which "dangerous" Palestinians infiltrate, nor does it cross his mind to wonder why photographers of Palestinian origins were excluded from the arena. To be honest, they could not have been here as most of them were expelled, and the few who were not were at the time subject to military rule and barred from liberal professions and occupations. The reporter also does not ask why the army volunteers share with him "secret information" about its actions and permit him to join the soldiers. Instead, he enjoys being the army's confidant and enjoys his position as someone who knows what sovereignty is and how it should be protected. He does not let us—his readers—know that what he knows about sovereignty was learned from those who exercise it and determine its meaning. Otherwise, he would notice that right here, in front of him, facing the firing squad, are people who do not doubt that they are part of the body politic out of which sovereignty should have been constituted.

Israeli historians who frequent Zionist archives to study Palestinians did not share with their readers the unwritten "deal" that is at the basis of their research and turned them (knowingly or unknowingly) into collaborators. This deal enables primarily Jewish-Israeli researchers' access to valuable documents about the history of Palestine/Israel in return for recognition of the archive as the

legal owner of the documents it places at their disposal. The Absentee Property Law (1950) and the Archives Law (1955) sanctioned the robbery and were part of the regime of terror used against citizens to naturalize the demonization of Palestinians who were expelled. Here is how property is defined by a law that renders dispossessed people into “absentees”:

‘Absentees’ property’ means property the legal owner of which, at any time during the period between the 16th of Kislev, 5708 (29th November, 1947) and the day on which a declaration is published, under section 9(d) of the Law of Administration Ordinance, 5708-1948, that the state of emergency by the Provisional Council of State on the 10th Iyar, 5708 (19th May 1948), has ceased to exist, was an absentee, or which, at any time as aforesaid, an absentee held or enjoyed, whether by himself or through another.¹³³

To avoid doubts, the part of the law addressing “rules of evidence” indicates that “where the Custodian has certified in writing that a person or body of persons is an absentee, that person or body of persons shall, so long as the contrary has not been proved, be regarded as an absentee,” but clause 30(i) makes clear that

the plea that a particular person is not an absentee, within the meaning of section 1(b)(1)(iii), by reason only that he had no control over the causes for which he left his place of residence as specified in that section shall not be heard.

Through legal poetics, expulsion becomes the more neutral “absence,” and those who are forced to be absent, even while present, become “absentees.” Naturally, so-called absentees’ photographs and documents are “abandoned” (along with the rest of their belongings and property). Scholars visiting Israeli archives and relying on them to conduct historical research are freely making use of looted documents that have remained, since they were looted, almost completely inaccessible to Palestinians. Palestinians were alienated from them first through expulsion and then over the years through further forms of physical and symbolic violence that kept those documents apart from them and kept them—depending on whether they were forced to be nongoverned, noncitizens, or second-class citizens—bereft of these documents.

Refusing to treat archival categories as factual realities, one can see that the hundreds of operations initiated by the state of Israel outside its borders to slaughter expelled Palestinians were not “retaliatory” measures, not even part of the effort to put an end to infiltration, but rather a performance meant to socialize Jewish Israeli citizens into a constant state of emergency, repeating the initial differentiation between them and the Palestinians. The performance of infiltration, falsely identified with the borders, was played inside the state of Israel to constitute Israeli sovereignty and

Jews as imperial-citizens and alternatively citizen-soldiers. Within a few years after the destruction of Palestine, the possibility of imagining life shared with Arabs—previously a matter of fact—was obliterated, and every word in the state’s language made shared scenarios impossible to imagine. Every citizen became an authorized agent of sovereignty, as can be heard in the words of a kibbutz member: “We determine the border. To the extent that we retreat, they [“the infiltrators”] will push forward in our direction.”¹³⁴

One of the *Ha’Olam Haze* magazine readers noticed an unexplained gap between the photo showing armed soldiers standing like a firing-squad in front of a line of Palestinians, and the sequence of photos in succeeding pages, not showing what eventually happened. In a letter to the editor, the reader wrote: “I get the impression that the reporter did not say everything he wished to say and that there are gaps in photo sequence. If you know the truth, why are you not telling us?” Tom Segev quotes the editor’s reply as it appeared a week later: “Some things are not for publication.”¹³⁵ The reply, it should be noted, is not an admission of withholding information or silencing it. It is, rather, a performative act that turns the reader-citizens into accomplices, allies who know that state crimes are being committed, allies who can sometimes wish to criticize or contend with them, but who also know that silence is appropriate and that keeping silent is in fact their civil duty.

This knowledge is at the basis of the separation of citizen from noncitizen. The former is made an accomplice to the secret of the ruling power even while criticizing it. He might even enjoy the fact that he is to be trusted, while the Palestinian becomes the one from whom the secret must be kept, while the secret is not, in fact, a secret at all but rather one more method of differentiation. The imposition of military rule on Palestinians, the distribution of their property among Jews, and the license to steal their profits and live in their homes are all practices that replicate the differentiation inherent to sovereignty without the regime’s participants ever having been moved by hatred or a special desire to harm the Palestinians.

These practices of differentiation even enable the citizen to adopt a moral or humane position at times and make sure that dispossession is performed lawfully or without superfluous harm. “I want life to get back to normal as soon as possible,” said the military governor of Western Galilee, Rechav’ am Zbelodivsky (Amir), at a meeting to which Palestinian representatives from Haifa (Tawfik Toubi and Boulus Farah) were summoned and asked to help displace the 3,000 Palestinians who remained in Haifa from several neighborhoods over from the Wadi Nisnas area. He continued:

If there was a chance to open a grocery store for the workers, I did it. I keep pressing for a school to be opened, all the time. If people turned to me for any help—I extended it as long as it did not interfere with the war effort.¹³⁶

He presents this uprooting as a minor obstacle, a necessity that would benefit from the cooperation of those about to be uprooted so that it can be completed in as short a time as possible with minimal casualties. This is, after all, “in everyone’s interest,” he tells the Palestinian representatives.

At this point, Palestinians by the tens of thousands had already been expelled from the city, and the horrific sight of their expulsion and the demolition of the city center had been witnessed by those who remained, whose representatives now heard from the governor that they ought to acquiesce and not resist eviction [see [figure 5.2](#)]. At this phase of sovereignty, when the assignment of roles—citizens, refugees, non-Jewish-citizens, and so on—had already become a fait accompli, the subjugated players were now asked to play a role in minimizing violence against them necessary to maintain the regime. The role of the Palestinians remaining in Israel had already been set within the regime’s grid. If they resisted against playing an active role in their own expulsion, then they would be performing the real role allotted them in the play: outlaws threatening the regime’s sovereignty. In doing so, they would then seem to justify the violence that the legal authorities would be “forced” to exercise in order to maintain law and order and get life “back to normal” again.

Infiltrators cannot exist anywhere except in the archive and cannot persist there unless Israeli citizens of Jewish origin endorse and sustain their fabrication. In all other places where “infiltrators” could be found, their presence is short-lived. They are either killed and eliminated or returned to their “proper” place—that is, refugee camps—where they stop being infiltrators but continue to reveal the illegitimacy of the Israeli regime. Hence, the study of the figure of the infiltrator cannot but be the study of the figure of the Israeli citizen fabricating the infiltrator, concomitantly fabricated by a regime that seeks to make cocitizenship impossible and unimaginable. This is how archival categories are lived as the imperial condition.

[The Commons Is Never Irremediably Lost: Jaffa Street, Jerusalem](#)

This lovely street, captured in a famous photo from the collection of the American Colony, was densely inhabited by numerous photographers’ studios—those of Militad Savvides, Boulos Meo, Elia Studio, Khalil Raad, Garvad Krikorian who worked with David Sabounji of Jaffa, Jacob Ben-Dov, and others—that were animated sites where diverse encounters took place (see [Fig. 3.31](#)).¹³⁷ Alongside these studios, there were photography stores such as Photo Prisma, Photo Europa, Ganan, and Abraham Yehezkeli.¹³⁸ Much of the history of early photographic activity in Palestine took place here: an open-ended urban space where many photographers had their studios; where photographed persons came by to have their photos taken or to buy those of others; and where occasional clients

acted as spectators of photographs offered to their gaze and interacted with them according to different cultural, political, and economic protocols that they also helped to shape. In a dense, fruitful, and vivacious urban fabric, frequented by at least one thousand people each day, male and female professionals labored together as operators of cameras, assistants, lighting directors, those who developed the negatives and those who printed them, those who retouched photographs and others who designed the space with accessories to accommodate different tastes and changing fashions.¹³⁹ Those spaces were frequented by collectors and travelers, tourists and local clients, and in them were photographed persons of all kinds who came to buy photographs and postcards of themselves and of others, of beloved or exotic places and varied landscapes. This street and the entire neighborhood was the beating heart of the photographic field of Palestine. A ten-minute walk away from the area stood the studios of Rassas, Za‘rur, and Hana Safieh, as well as the American Colony studio.¹⁴⁰



Fig. 3.31

The activity of these photographers combined studio work with the project of photographing a changing Palestine. With time, the drawers and shelves of each of these studios contained a rich archive of photographs of life in Palestine and a unique record of a vivid local photographic culture of a place not yet destroyed. From our perspective today, it is tempting to say that a mixture of ethnic and national groups had been formed by means of photographic activity. However, a more accurate historical description would be that, in this area of Jerusalem, photographers, photographed persons, and spectators mingled without conceiving of themselves in total opposition to others. The binary division of the world into Arabs and Jews was not yet operative and certainly not absolute, and photographers, for example, advertised on the street signs and were known by their name and their geographical provenance: Armenian, Safadi, or Jerusalemite. The camera enabled them to be attracted

by or remain oblivious to ethnic and national origins, but certainly did not enable the recognition in them of a commanding law. These forms of identification did not limit or subsume their actions and interactions with others, whether with the photographed persons caught in the lens, the clients who patronized the shops, nor, certainly, with those with whom they shared a passion for photography.¹⁴¹

Following the July 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem by one of the Jewish underground militias (Irgun), the staff of the American Colony studio feared for the thousands of photographs held in the colony and sent about 20,000 negatives to the United States, thus saving them from destruction, looting, and appropriation.¹⁴² From 1948, the possibility of a mixed photography in Palestine not determined by differential power relations imposed by imperial sovereignty had been destroyed. Palestinians, who opposed the partition of Palestine, were excluded from the legal agreements achieved between Jordan and the newly established state of Israel, where technical slips on the maps turned this area, the locus of photographic activity in Palestine, into a no man's land, a disputed territory (see Fig. 3.32). Even though neither side—neither Israel nor Jordan—was authorized to control it or intervene there, “the line of houses in the no-man's-land, on both sides of Jaffa Street was ruined.”¹⁴³ The photographers' studios and stores were already collapsed.¹⁴⁴ No one claimed responsibility for the ruination or for the looting of the vast and invaluable photographic archives. Later, in David Kroyanker's book, taking up all of half a line, one can read: “Demolition crew members of the Israeli army blast abandoned houses in the city, from Jaffa Gate to the Fast Hotel.”¹⁴⁵ In 1967, when Israel conquered the eastern part of Jerusalem, it completed the erasure of this area. The brutal transformation of Palestine into rubble was motivated by a total disregard for the world created there over centuries and a desire of the militant faction of Zionism to render Palestine Jewish. Here on Jaffa Street, intentionally ruined, the invaluable fabric of one hundred years of photography in Palestine as a practice in which diverse photographers, photographed persons, and spectators participated was ruined. In its destruction we can also read the destruction of life before the imperial archival regime categorized “Arab” and “Jewish” as radically differentiated groups.



Fig. 3.32

What was destroyed in the violence of the late 1940s was much more than the singular studios of talented photographers, being slowly discovered and rescued from concealed military basements. We still cannot know how large these looted collections are and how much was destroyed or is still concealed. Whoever claims to know misleads, since under the regime of the archive one can easily be misled into repeating military information shaped by considerations foreign to civil ones. Additional Israeli archives might enjoy parts of these collections and are complicit not only in the crime of looting but in the crime of violently differentiating access to the materials along ethnic lines. The exclusion of Palestinians is what impedes the collapse of the hall of mirrors in which citizens are trapped, viewing the perspective, reflected ad infinitum, which is violently imposed by differential sovereignty. Very little is known of these photographic collections in comparison to the number of studios and the intense activity that encouraged photographers and traders to open studios and stores next to each other in this quarter.

The ruination of the nonpartitioned photographic field that was active in Palestine until 1948 is encoded, I argue, in any portion of light manipulated and processed by a camera in the Palestine-that-became-Israel. Old Jaffa Street still lives in every photograph of the region. The way that this light will be decoded and recoded can yield a different image depending on who can participate in the process of translating light to image and who can make its meaning.

Imagine Going on Strike: Photographers

“These victims in the published photographs are ours, they are from us, from our lands, our families,” write a group of activists, scholars, artists and feminist militants, in protest against the publication of a coffee table book whose authors “unearthed” from forgotten archives hundreds of photographs of sexual violence against women of color in different places colonized by France.¹ The protestors reject showing these images under the excuse of educational purposes and pose the photographed persons, and themselves, their direct or indirect descendants, as having rights *to* and *in* these images:

We categorically reject the idea that due to the historical colonial barbarity, these people would have lost their right to the image, their right to respect and dignity. That they would be condemned for eternity to be displayed in the barbarian countries that colonized them. Do not they have the right to peace, to finally escape this violent fixation?²

Their demands are pertinent to the colonial photographic wealth accumulated during almost two centuries. Imagine that these demands have the power to intervene in the system of rights distribution that made these images possible. Imagine going on strike to disrupt the relentless movement that continues to re-expose their descendants to further consequences of imperial violence. Given that the visual wealth is accumulated in archives’ and institutions’ public holdings, we can imagine a strike not only about future labor and rights but also in relation to already extracted wealth. Photographers, who were assigned the role of middlemen, can play a key role in such a strike, a disruption of the self-reproduction of imperial violence and its injustices.

Let's recall. From the inception of photography, it was assumed—and violently obtained—that the people photographed were to provide the resources and the free (or cheap) labor for the large-scale photographic enterprise that from the very beginning was based on capitalist logic. While it is obvious that there is no photograph without photographed persons, the structures of primitive accumulation were already naturalized in the beginning of the nineteenth century, when photography took shape, that the expropriation of the photographed persons from rights in the photos could be institutionalized as the order of things. Through imperial enterprises of visual surveys of all sorts in invaded and colonized places, of profiling and surveillance, and of the ideology and practices of documentary and news, primitive accumulation imposed structures of capital on the photographic commons. This was rarely discussed, as if not to taint the artistic, educational, and informational ethos and values. Photographers, who were also charged with alleviating the violence of extraction, were offered some benefit from the imperial domination of photographic markets, single authorship of their photographs, that is, some privileges and symbolic capital in exchange for which they were expected to act as middlepersons extracting the object of their craft from others. Accorded the right to deprive other participants of their share in the photographs and in the world that they shared and to conceal the exploitative meaning of the photographic encounter, photographers mostly did not enrich themselves; this was reserved for bigger imperial sharks such as collectors, corporations, industrialists, archives, or museums.

A general imperial right to seize and take was practiced as given and unlimited. The use of the camera was built on this *right to take*—to take *photographs* in worlds that were “opened up” for them by imperial agents who socialized them to see this right as inalienable, given to them for the sake of humanity, and could be exercised regardless of the will of those depicted as paradigmatic victims of imperial violence.

Photography was constitutive in the transformation of colonized people into “types,” the type cast of imperial victims, whose preservation in archives doomed them to endlessly embody the status and role associated with being-a-type. The camera’s focus on destitute bodies exemplifies the mode of functioning of imperialism’s two arms: one takes, the other performs a care of a sort, thus contributing to the transformation of the destruction of shared worlds into worlds of these “types,” as if the world that they were forced to share could be split into worlds apart. The many involved in photography are considered secondary actors, while the work of a few individual photographers authorized to go almost anywhere constitute the spine of the histories of photography and art and the store value of lucrative markets.

Even as photographers tend to identify more with their vulnerable position, they still enjoy legal and symbolic capital and privileges that they can performatively revoke in the name of and for the sake of the commons. In revoking their exclusive rights, these privileges no longer enrich corporations and archives but can now be redistributed more justly and shared with those from whom they were seized or whose expropriation they facilitated—an opportunity to experiment in the potentialities that a nondifferential body politic could generate. Regardless of what is captured in the photographs, the question of the fate and destiny of images taken with imperial rights cannot be defined any longer in terms of fair contracts, deals, and bargains made between a few photographers and those who happened to own many of them (assumed to be their owners) and archives, image banks, corporations, and states that act as if this imperial legacy is “virtually ‘free’ content” for which they can “acquire licenses to sell the reproduction rights of photographic images in return for giving photographers a share of the revenue generated from the sales.”³

The image that photographers naively believed was theirs, even though they extracted it from and against people’s will, is constantly expropriated from them by corporate states and used as these corporations’ primitive accumulation for the development and implementation of different profiling and surveillance software. Under these circumstances, photographers should enact their work-stoppage power and go on strike.

Imagine photographers refraining from going to “conflict zones,” not fueling the endless thirsty corporations with more images that signal to them that the terrain is ready for further interventions, whether in the name of humanitarian aid and restoration, “security,” or nationalist expansions.

Imagine photographers not taking new photographs of imperial disaster, not submitting news to media corporations predicated on this assumption, not showing up at photo opportunities of statesmen visiting conflict zones for which they should have been accountable, not giving their permission to use their photographs unless photographed persons have negotiated their meaning and their rights to these photographs. Rather than acting as if such corporations threaten only photographers’ rights as individual experts in photography, imagine the photographers acting as if the very idea of rights in a shared world is threatened as long as rights are premised on this primitive accumulation.

Imagine photographers going on strike and using differently the privileges that were historically given to them when they were recognized as the sole signatories of photographs, the shareholders of a privatized piece of the commons. Imagine photographers ceasing to act as middlepersons and calling for a revocation of the rights of all other shareholders and transmitting unconditionally their rights to

the photographed persons and to their communities, the rights to own, administer, discard, trade, revise, and study vast collections of visual wealth generated out of their ancestors' plight and used to continue to exploit them.

Imagine going on strike for the redistribution of photographic wealth as part of world repair, led by those communities without which such images could not exist.

Imagine photojournalists and "concerned photographers"—two key personas in the reproduction of the division of the world into developed and developing places via the ideology called documentary—going on strike and ceasing to fuel the voracious machine of news, archives, terror, shock, and fear that provide corporate states with more power to persecute and sacrifice more people on the altar of the security of imperial citizens like them, and disseminate more arms through which almost no person on earth is left outside of their operation either in front of or behind their lethal viewfinder.

Imagine photographers who are still considered owners of photographs they have taken, acting on behalf of the many, proclaiming this photographic wealth unavailable for appropriation by corporate states and immigration and criminalization purposes and uses.

Imagine a general photographic strike for an unknown period of time, until the imperial crimes already registered in and through photography are acknowledged and made accountable so as to render the rights that served as their infrastructures repealed.