

Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism is a call to de-imperialise museums, archives and the discipline of history itself. Photographic theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay invites us to return to a moment before 'original' imperial violence occurred and set to work from there. It is an endeavour to think against and before imperialism, while simultaneously recognising that we are always already conditioned by it. *Potential History* asks us to unlearn imperial modes of thinking, the archive, the museum, the document, and history itself. To unlearn imperialism, Azoulay suggests that we reject a temporality that consigns violence to the distant past and instead attend to its still-present potentialities. She proposes a methodological approach to historical and archival materials that refuses to consign them to an irretrievable past. She is not suggesting that we counter the work of imperialism with alternative narratives, but rather, that we pursue an ongoing process of unlearning and undoing of the knowledge structures that sought to fix events, timelines and facts.

The book begins by considering the looted object, the museum and the archive while later chapters turn to questions of the discipline of history, sovereignty, human rights and reparations. Between each chapter Azoulay makes compelling proposals and draws on imagination as a challenge to seemingly incontestable histories. These short sections ask us to imagine what it would mean for museum workers, photographers, historians and 'the governed' to go on strike as a mode of refusal and transformation, and not giving up 'until our world is repaired' (p. 530).

Building on previous work, Azoulay develops the concept of the 'imperial shutter'. The camera's shutter, Azoulay says 'is a synecdoche for the operation of the imperial enterprise altogether' (p. 2). It draws dividing lines in time, space and the body politic. Azoulay argues that we must unlearn the authority of the shutter to produce an event – to define chronological order and the organisation of social place. Rather, Azoulay suggests that we endeavour to find the dormant potentialities in the shutter's exclusions, restrictions and differentiations. Here her concept of the 'unseen photograph' is most compelling. Azoulay shows that a history of mass rape of German women by Allied occupants in Berlin after World War Two can be read through precisely what does not appear in photographs of German women's seemingly benign exchanges with occupying soldiers. She insists that although it might be left illegible and unprocessed, an excess of information is there nonetheless. She therefore argues that

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 the photographs taken in those zones and decode them outside of imperial epistemologies. (p. 238)

The ‘untaken photograph’, which could take the form of a testimony, a journal entry, a drawing or a photograph, has the potential to take us back to the moment the camera’s shutter clicked closed and makes ‘repressed potentialities present again’ (p.288).

Azoulay’s sketches of photographs of the deportation of Palestinians, after the International Committee of the Red Cross’s photographic archive denied her permission to exhibit the photographs with her own descriptions, is an attempt to make such potentialities present. By reproducing the photographs as sketches, Azoulay draws attention to otherwise missed details. Indeed, this is an instance of the other lives of the image.

It was through the violent exercise of the ‘imperial shutter’ that objects were detached from their material and political worlds and redefined as ‘modern art’ while denying their complicity in campaigns of imperial violence. These objects were rendered ‘worldless’ (the expression is borrowed from Hannah Arendt),¹ singled out by museums and other institutions and inserted into the ‘right’ place in imperial-imposed timelines and histories of art. However, Azoulay suggests that objects continue to hold the memory – I would even suggest a forensic memory – of their original worlds despite their coercion into new forms.² If these objects continue to hold memory as Azoulay suggests, we might say that they contain a forensic memory that can be called on to recall the violence that wrenched them from their worlds. The objects may be brought to bear witness in order to map and reconstruct their trajectories and their histories of imperial violence. These objects might even be thought of as a sensorium and an archive that can be interrogated.

Azoulay is concerned with the materiality and lives of these objects as they are enmeshed in ‘networks’ and ‘assemblages’ of humans and non-humans.³ They have been subject to processes that endeavoured to transform them into objects of knowledge and high art and yet, as active agents, Azoulay shows that these objects are at times unruly, resisting the easy transformation into new forms.

Potential History asks us to unlearn this dissociation between objects and people. Conceiving of objects, documents and photographs as ‘living companions’, Azoulay approaches them as still belonging to the communities from which they were appropriated. The work of potential history entails a reversal of the status of looted objects as art and belonging to the ‘past’ such that the rights imprinted in these objects be recognised. Such a recognition of these rights would allow the implicated communities to reunite with their objects. Then we might dare to imagine that African migrants seeking asylum were able to invoke their rights to these objects as a basis for their demands.

Azoulay compellingly suggests that we might even think of objects forcibly deported from their homelands to museums, as refugees. Like refugees, these objects

1 H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harvest Book, 1975), 466.

2 By forensic I am referring to the work of the Forensic Architecture project. See E. Weizman, *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014); J.H. Bondergaard, *Forensic Memory: Literature after Testimony* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

3 See B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

are displaced, disconnected and isolated. She discusses them as ‘missing their previous life and being missed by those who were left behind or deported elsewhere’ (p. 156). It is incredibly generative to think of objects in this way, as not only refugees but perhaps even as missing persons. We might think of the worlds left behind as missing, and continuing to miss, these objects – a missing-ness that can perhaps not be so easily repaired by the restitution/repatriation of the objects. This is where Azoulay argues for not just restitution but a return to the moment of their being rendered missing. For Azoulay restitution is one part of the process of recreating a common world, but this requires a holding open of the ‘imperial shutter’ and unlearning the dissociation of the past from the present, and of objects from their worlds.

Azoulay is interested to show that these objects did not find their way into archives and museums by chance, but were instrumental in the development of various scholarly and professional processes which presented the study and collection of plundered objects as a decent and acceptable occupation. One area that Azoulay does not discuss in this book is the collection and display of human remains from the global South by the very same museums, which was similarly implicated in the development and validation of various scholarly discourses. Human remains often arrived at these institutions along with material objects, only to be separated during processes of cataloguing and indexing.⁴ In this way the objects were disconnected a second time from their human and non-human worlds that were in fact deeply enmeshed with one another. Indeed, Ciraj Rassool has argued that the objects that travelled to institutions along with human remains might be thought of as deeply connected with those human remains and therefore in themselves ancestors.⁵

In *Potential History*, Azoulay offers a critique of the canon of history as a mode for studying the processes of looting and dispossession. Her argument that we recognise the legacies of imperialism manifest in the discipline of history is important, as is her critique of the ways in which history periodises and historicises the world, separating past from present and objects from people. While I agree with Azoulay’s prompt for historians to more deeply question and critique the violence of the discipline and the archive, the work has and is being done to critique the institutions of the archive and the museum, to think carefully about the disciplinary grammar of the archive, to unlearn the ontology of the document and to critique the linear timelines of history. We are already doing the work of unlearning.

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4 For an extended discussion of scholarship on the relationship between objects and the dead, the missing and human remains, see J. Fontein, ‘Remaking the Dead, Uncertainty and the Torque of Human Remains in Northern Zimbabwe’, in F. Stepputat (ed), *Governing the Dead: Sovereignty and the Politics of Dead Bodies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); C. Krmpotich, J. Fontein and J. Harries, ‘The Substance of Bodies: The Emotive Materiality and Affective Presence of Human Remains’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 15, 4, 2010, 371–84; L. Renshaw, ‘Lost Objects, Imaginary Assemblages and Mass Graves of the Spanish Civil War’, podcast, <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/lost-objects-imaginary-assemblages-and-mass-graves-spanish-civil-war>.

5 See N. Rousseau, R. Moosage and C. Rassool, ‘Missing and Missed: Rehumanisation, the Nation and Missing-ness’, *Kronos*, 44, 2018, 10–32.