

Errata in retro-prospect

Lisa Deml

In March 2020, Tamara Lanier filed a lawsuit against Harvard University over the rights to daguerreotypes that scholars believe to be some of the oldest images of slavery. The photographs, held by Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, depict Lanier's great-great-great-grandfather Renty Taylor and his daughter Delia and are portraits taken as part of a series in 1850 at the behest of the biologist and Harvard professor Louis Agassiz. Agassiz was a proponent of polygenism – the hypothesis that human races descended from different origins and which advanced the racist idea that Black people were inferior to whites – and viewed the portrayed enslaved people as empirical data to substantiate his theory. Consequently, Renty Taylor and Delia could not and did not consent to having their images captured; and Agassiz could not then – and Harvard cannot now – assert to have lawful possession of their images. Tamara Lanier's legal claim against Harvard University for 'wrongful seizure, possession and expropriation'¹ is straightforward. But neither access to nor ownership of the 'original' daguerreotypes are the central issues here; rather, it is 'about the right to name and to define... the right to deny perpetrators and their inheritors their imperial right to continue to own and profit off of what was robbed, the right to hold dear ones as family rather than documents.'²

Lanier's case addresses and challenges the extractive violence and imperial power structures underlying and permeating taxonomic and epistemic systems, and marks a key moment in the exhibition 'Errata' at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin. The title is borrowed from a larger project by the theorist and filmmaker Ariella Aïsha Azoulay previously exhibited in its entirety at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona. 'Errata' consists of Azoulay's arrangement of approximately fifty books, a few dozen images, drawings and other elements unfolding along two rows of vitrines. They share HKW's main foyer with two video installations by New Red Order (NRO), a self-declared public secret society that is less artists' collective than continually expanding and evolving association and collection agency for colonial debts. Although materially distinct, the theoretic and artistic positions presented in 'Errata' coalesce productively to expose the fault lines in modern historiography and memory cultures. Both Azoulay and NRO propose and experiment with archival and mnemonic working methods that are premised on the right to intervene in and reverse imperial mechanisms of knowledge extraction and production.



Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Errata* (detail), 2020, exhibition view, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain, photo: Roberto Ruiz

Azoulay penetrates the paper trail culture of modern historiography through textual and visual interventions, including commentary, inscription, erasure, replacement, juxtaposition, addition, and subtraction. So the word ‘PLUNDERED’ is taped across an essay on the Belgian artist Jean Willy Mestach’s collection of African Art; mug shots of ‘indentured labourers’ in South Africa are anonymised and superimposed on portraits of their colonial oppressors; and details of hand gestures in well-known paintings picturing the administration of slavery by white arbiters are redrawn to foreground the manufacturing of imperial archives. By exposing the fabrication of documentary evidence and historical sources, Azoulay contests and undermines the finality and authority of archival material and opens up a space for potential histories to be imagined and actualised. These interventions might seem naïve or superficial, yet hers is an attempt to not merely criticise imperial epistemes but to amend some of the substantial and secondary errors inscribed in papers and objects and to unlearn imperial structures imposed as *fait accompli*. With this presentation, Azoulay probes and demonstrates the viability and capacity of the claims she makes in her latest publication, *Potential History*,³ an onto-epistemic refusal to accept ‘as irreversible [imperialism’s] outcome and the categories, statuses, and forms under which it materialises’.⁴ The practice of potential history seeks to shift the framework of archival literacy from factual adherence toward radical imagination, as it ‘reads records of destruction as proof of persistence and the right to survive’.⁵ As an event of ongoing resistance to a crime, Palestine is paradigmatic for this rationale that ‘allows [it] to be and to have always been possible’.⁶



Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Errata* (detail), 2020, exhibition view, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, Germany, photo by the author

What Azoulay demands in writing and explicates in exhibiting her research materials is a rejection of the taxonomic, epistemic, political and physical separation of ‘people’, ‘objects’ and ‘documents’. Objects, according to Azoulay, should be considered ‘as proof of one’s place in the world, as delegates of people’s worlds in the new formations into which they were forcibly integrated, and as the grounds out of which the commons and a shared political existence can be reconfigured’.⁷ Consequently, to comprehend the substantial ties between ‘people’ and ‘objects’ entails an acknowledgment of the rights of people as inscribed in their objects, rights that prevail despite the seizure, possession and expropriation of those objects by imperial apparatuses. In order to enable these rights to be recognised, the status and identity of the items as art objects must be reversed and revoked, revealing and repealing the extractive logic at the core of the history and theory of art. Resonating with Achille Mbembe’s criticism of restitution offered by European museums as paternalist and legalist gestures, since the loss ‘is not of the objects but of the world of which these objects were the carriers’.⁸ Azoulay advocates for ‘a potential history of plunder, art, and rights together, in order to anticipate and actualize a closure to and replacement of imperial principles on which these separate histories are built’.⁹

In her attempt to make these two realms coincide – the treatment of objects and the maltreatment of people – Azoulay is echoed by NRO’s video installations. ‘Give it back... Give it BACK...’, a white male figure whispers intently as he pierces through the screen with a haunting look against the backdrop of a traditional landscape painting that appears to be the American West. *Never Settle* (2018–) is an ongoing project assuming different shapes and formats; at HKW, it emulates a promotion stand with banners, flags and a video screen at the centre recruiting accomplices in decolonial struggles. Underscored by motivational slogans in bright blue capital letters commending to ‘PROMOTE INDIGENOUS FUTURES’ and ‘CREATE A BETTER TOMORROW TODAY,’ a group of inductees boasts about their feelings of relief of white guilt and takes pride in their newly found sense of purpose in their lives after having joined the association. NRO’s method to decolonise oneself and counteract settler colonialist realities strictly follows the ‘three C’s’: contract, concealment and capture. Contractual treaty processes and the coproduction of protocol bind participants to the association, while concealment through the custom-fitted masks allows them the freedom of anonymity. Capture, the most speculative and provocative element of NRO’s programme, sees their members combing through museum displays and scanning objects with smartphones to ‘spectrally liberate them’. The resulting 3D-renderings are integrated in *Culture Capture* (2018), a video in which monuments to the white imaginary are virtually disfigured into calcified and tumorous digital grotesqueries. Accomplices in the decolonial struggle, NRO asserts, must reconfigure colonial structures – including through crimes against present-day representation and reality – in order that these can be transformed.



New Red Order, *Never Settle*, 2018–, single-channel video, courtesy of the artists

To this end, 'Errata' opens up access routes into the past and guides its spectators along a counter-expedition to make visible the injured infrastructures of art and historiography. This reparative movement of people toward their expropriated objects held in academic institutions and museum collections renders archival strongholds vulnerable by undermining their ability to relegate imperial violence to a well-guarded and bygone time. In its rejection of the relentless drive forward that imperialism spurs on, Azoulay's and NRO's presentations proclaim a refusal to accept that the violence that was done is now done. Instead, they insist that much of that violence is reversible with the abolition of imperial rights (to take, to impose, to dissociate, to extract, to plunder, to modernise, to develop, to study, and so forth). The notion of the archive as a depository of documents from the past is thus revealed as a technology of violence itself, manufacturing the past and its material residue as a vantage point for extending imperial histories into present and future realities. Fundamental for this self-actualising technology is the taxonomic impact of the archive, forcing people to embody, and to perpetually inhabit, imperial categories such as 'slave' or 'property'. As such, the document of the archive is the imperial object par excellence.

Tamara Lanier's claim against Harvard University resounds here as it is founded on a profound rejection of the irreversibility of imperial violence and its materialisation in the archive. Her lawsuit exposes the complicity of scholarship in sustaining and reproducing such violence by relying on imperial archives for knowledge production and transmission. The recognition of and adherence to taxonomic and epistemic categories is, so argues Azoulay, one symptom of 'how scholarship is shaped more broadly along the spatial, temporal, and political terms first set by imperialism'.¹⁰ Academia seems to accept and corroborate the assumption that the abolition of imperial crimes such as slavery could be materialised in archival documents rather than in reparations that stimulate the recovery of other types of relationships between people. Lanier's claim can be regarded as an exemplary case of potential history, as it seeks to unlearn the institutions 'in, through, and with which we produce our knowledge. The question is not how to study imperial violence as yet another object of research, but how to withdraw, as much as we can, from the operation of these imperial technologies of knowledge production.'¹¹

But 'Errata' moves beyond mere criticism and attempts to devise a modus operandi that subverts and transmits knowledge against imperial structures. Spectators are called on to run every theoretical exercise and proposed action through a hastening climactic crisis, almost to test for relevance and consequence. And so it is that the 'Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne – The Original' exhibition presented concurrently at HKW is quickly dismantled and dissected as a reductive self-affirmation of museological and archival practices derived from imperialism.

Famously, and by now almost mythically, Warburg's *Atlas* endeavoured to provide a pictorial representation of the influences of the ancient world in the Renaissance and beyond by tracing recurring visual themes and stylistic archetypes across time. Based on a continuous re-arrangement of photographic reproductions of sculptures, paintings, drawings, scriptures, news clippings and advertisements mounted on large panels, his proposed working method set new standards, traversing disciplinary and canonical as well as temporal, geographical and cultural boundaries. The unfinished magnum opus is restored in its last documented version of 1929 almost completely with the original images – themselves photographic reproductions. Named after the mother of the nine Muses and goddess of memory in Greek mythology, Warburg's *Atlas* intends to function as an instrument of cognition in order to identify civilisational continuities. The theory of evolution is thus transferred to the field of cultural psychology.¹²



Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne - The Original, 1929/2020, exhibition view, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, Germany, © Silke Briel / HKW

The critique that 'Errata' induces concerning this concurrent exhibition is twofold: on the one hand, it points out the possibilities and limitations of Warburg's approach; on the other, it interrogates the curatorial and institutional embedding of the *Atlas*. What is outlined on sixty-three panels is a new form of indexing that does not function by verbal descriptions but by seeing. This methodological shift is revolutionary. However, what Warburg and his collaborators neglected are the premises of visibility – the historical, political, social, economic conditions and reasons that enable a certain cultural tradition and visual language to appear and prevail, often through processes of forced expropriation, imperial domination, appropriation and assimilation. The imperial infrastructures that ascribe value to objects, leading to their

preservation and, eventually, accessibility as objects of study (even if only as photographic reproductions), are of no concern to Warburg.

The implications of what Warburg was forced to omit for the benefit of his research focus are not accounted for but, rather, magnified by the lack of contextualisation and explanation provided by the curators of the exhibition.¹³ *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* highlights the stylistic and art historical qualities of the objects via their photographic reproductions on display and fails to address the environments and communities they were seized from as well as the violence inscribed in them and the photographic frame of their reproduction. Instead of shedding light on the blind spots of the *Atlas* and expanding its applicability to non-European cultures, as Warburg had envisaged, the presentation at HKW rather pays homage to the inventiveness of the project at the time – a historical reproduction epitomised by the addition to the title ‘*The Original*’. The lack of criticality and connectivity to present-day realities preclude the *Atlas*’s methodological potential from becoming productive for future historiographical and archival projects and confine it to the realms of expert research and scholarly discourse.

For HKW to allow for, or rather purposefully channel, a confrontation between Aby Warburg and NRO and Azoulay might be regarded as courageous – and/or a shortsighted attempt to reconcile the current programmatic emphasis with its institutional orientation. While the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* is hosted in the main exhibition hall, an awe-inspiring installation in subdued lighting and harmonious shades of grey that instils humble contemplation, ‘Errata’ seems almost incidental in HKW’s grand foyer, a poorly lit and incohesive presentation that has to compete for attention and concentration in a space of transit and transaction. Even though the impetus for Azoulay’s and NRO’s interrogation of historiography seems all the more relevant and forceful against the background of the *Atlas*, the lack of attention and care devoted to their display degrades them to the position of stand-ins. As such, ‘Errata’ appears to have been set up to attest to HKW’s own critical capacity and self-reflexivity, merely illustrating its admission of complicity in perpetuating the extractive infrastructures underlying the cultural industry. If we accept, as Tuck and Yang write in their critique of decolonisation 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’,¹⁴ the task at hand cannot be to forever write alternative histories to imperial worldviews. If the admission of complicity entails no structural or programmatic consequences, then it remains merely an ethical gesture.



New Red Order, *Never Settle*, 2018–, single-channel video, courtesy of the artists

One can only speculate about the critical and imaginative potential that could have been generated and activated had NRO and Azoulay been granted similar scope and commitment as Warburg. But ‘Errata’ unfolds a haunting presence at Haus der Kulturen der Welt as its impact is effectuated only in spectatorship. Releasing spectators from the limited roles of external readers, viewers and interpreters to whom the paper trail culture of modern historiography has bound them, New Red Order and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay configure a *modus operandi* that motivates individual agency and shared responsibility by insisting on the right to intervene in and reverse imperial mechanisms of knowledge production and practice.

Tamara Lanier exercises this right in her affirmative rejection of Harvard University’s incessant use, ownership, display and profit of images depicting her ancestors for the sake of scholarly inquiry. The lawsuit challenges the institutionalisation of images and documents as defined by their ontological separateness from the people against whom they were produced and used. The case of Renty Taylor, and his daughter, problematises the taxonomic and epistemic systems that ‘reduce photography to its products, its products to their visuality, and its scholars to specialists of images’.¹⁵ Lanier asked the university to stop licensing the photographs of Renty Taylor and Delia, but Harvard approved the reproduction of these images in a new publication. The book’s foreword asks, ‘can any one person be the heir to these photographs, or does the responsibility for them fall to all of us to protect them as archival relics of history, to be studied, pondered, and reckoned with?’¹⁶ If Lanier has a claim, the photographs will no longer be known only as ‘archival relics’ but as records of dignified human subjects whose presence still resonates in the present and future. What kind of scholarship will Renty

Taylor and Delia prompt if they are seen this way — as figures not in need of reclamation or objects of fascination but as ancestors, whose memory has been improbably preserved?

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- ¹ See Eamon Whalen, 'A Lawsuit at Harvard Pries Open Debates About Science and Reparations,' in *The Nation*, 28 November, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/harvard-slavery-racism/>, last visited on 12 September, 2022. The hearing in front of the Massachusetts Superior Court took place on 20 October, 2020. Attorney Anton Melitsky, representing Harvard's Peabody Museum, argued that Lanier's suit should be dismissed for several reasons, including a longstanding rule that ownership of photographs does not lie with the photograph's subjects but with the photographer. Reversing that standard, according to Melitsky, would be severely damaging for press coverage and news reports that document world events without seeking the prior consent of the people in the images. Attorneys Benjamin Crump and Joshua Koskoff, representing Lanier, responded that they are not claiming that Renty and Delia should have owned the images because they were the subjects, but that they were victims of a crime. Crump argued that Harvard should not have the right to retain 'the fruits of their crimes', and Lanier's family is the only rightful owner of the images. See Claire Bessette, 'Judge hears arguments in Norwich woman's suit against Harvard over slave photos,' in *The Day*, 20 October, 2020, <https://www.theday.com/local-news/20201020/judge-hears-arguments-in-norwich-womans-suit-against-harvard-over-slave-photos>, last visited on 12 September, 2022.
 - ² Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, 'Free Renty! Reparations, Photography, and the Imperial Premise of Scholarship,' in *Hyperallergic*, 2 March, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/545667/free-renty/>, last visited on 12 September, 2022.
 - ³ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Verso, London, 2019. See also Guy Mannes-Abbott, 'BOOK REVIEW: Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, 'Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism',' in *Third Text* Online, 6 March, 2020, <http://www.thirdtext.org/mannesabbott-azoulay>, last visited on 12 September, 2022.
 - ⁴ Azoulay, *Potential History*, op cit, p 56.
 - ⁵ Ibid, p 187.
 - ⁶ Ibid, pp 286–287.
 - ⁷ Ibid, p 56.
 - ⁸ Ibid, p 141.
 - ⁹ Ibid, p 63.
 - ¹⁰ Azoulay, 'Free Renty!,' op cit.
 - ¹¹ Ibid.
 - ¹² See Martin Trembl and Sigrid Weigel, eds, *Aby Warburg: Werke*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 2018, p 605.
 - ¹³ A forthcoming volume with extensive commentaries by the curators might compensate for this lack of contextualisation and explanation.
 - ¹⁴ Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor,' in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol 1, No 1, 2012, p 2.
 - ¹⁵ Azoulay, *Potential History*, op cit, p 3.
 - ¹⁶ Caitlin Galante-DeAngelis Hopkins, 'Harvard's Window Dressing on Slavery,' in *The Harvard Crimson*, 27 October, 2020, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/10/27/hopkins-harvard-window-dressing-slavery/>, last visited on 12 September, 2022.

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Illustrations

Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne - The Original, 1929/2020, exhibition view, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, Germany, © Silke Briel / HKW

A. A. Azoulay, *Errata* (detail), 2020, exhibition view, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain, photo: Roberto Ruiz

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New Red Order, *Never Settle*, 2018–, single-channel video, courtesy of the artists

Biographical Note

Lisa Deml is a curator and writer based in Berlin and London. Initially trained as a journalist, she subsequently worked for public institutions and non-profit organisations internationally, including Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, Haus der Kunst, Munich, and Ashkal Alwan, Beirut. Her texts have been featured in exhibition catalogues and journals, including *Rabih Mroué: Interviews* (ed. Nadim Samman, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin: 2022) as well as in *Third Text*, *PARSE*, and *Critical Arts*. Her current Midlands4Cities funded research project at Birmingham City University investigates the aesthetics of citizen journalist media production and its appropriation in artistic, curatorial, and historiographical practices.