

## **Free Renty! – Reparations, Photography, and the Imperial Premise of Scholarship**

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

“Reparations” is the straightforward answer to structural violence. That the necessity of reparations has lost its obviousness and “the case for reparations” has to be written once and again, cannot be explained without asking about the complicity of academic institutions. Many scholars in different disciplines write about imperial crimes as their object of study — that is, as something sealed in the past that can be separated from the reparations due. Scholars’ acceptance of imperial categories of knowledge is one symptom of how scholarship is shaped more broadly along the spatial, temporal, and political terms first set by imperialism.

Many scholars doing thoughtful, critical work are nonetheless expected to think about their objects of study within imperial timelines that make ideas such as “US history,” “Israeli art,” or the “end” of WWII (or “war” itself), their points of reference and the unquestioned assumptions of their research. Researchers are invited to offer alternate interpretations and read against or along the grain, but the structure of knowledge production invites and positions them as experts who enjoy access to archival documents that determine how people affected by those documents are studied, named, placed as “slaves,” “refugees,” or “undocumented.” Professionally, scholars are recognized within their disciplines and institutions only once they have proven their deep acquaintance with imperial schemes of knowledge and interiorize their habitus.

Reparations require a non-imperial temporality and agenda, one that insists that what is studied did not occur “in the past,” and that people’s right to see their worlds

repaired is justified. Why, we must ask, is scholarship — even critical scholarship — still not aligned with reparations claims, and is instead aligned with the imperial configuration of the world?

I offer the practice of potential history instead. Potential history is not an advocacy for reparations as a distinct position in the field. Rather, it is an attempt to turn reparations into a constitutive part of scholarship, to transform institutions. It is not simply about granting money, returning objects from museums, or changing the names of buildings, though those are some of its components. Reparations, as my recent book [\*Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism\*](#) (Verso 2019) argues, are not a conclusion or an end goal. They are the practice of potential history.

Let us take the archive. In *Unlearning Imperialism*, I show that the assumption that the archive is a depository of documents from the past, is a technology of violence. The archive, in fact, produces the past, and facilitates — along with the museum — the primitive accumulation of people’s lives. It is not a place where the past is stored; it is an institution that manufactures the past as if people’s refusal to be colonized, subjugated, made stateless is over, and what was acquired through violence is a fait accompli. The archive forces people whose worlds have been destroyed through imperial categories like “slave” or “property” to embody those categories, reinforcing the alleged past-ness and robbery of people’s lives.

The document of the archive is the imperial object par excellence. Given that esteemed scholarship is often document-based — even though as scholars we are adept at offering “new,” radical interpretations of documents — we are still operating this imperial archival technology of violence. The imaginary of the archive is built around

dusty and yellowish papers, its workers as tedious ants and devoted librarians. This picturesque imaginary camouflages the battalions of imperial archivists, those who over the past 500 stole people's lives, lands, objects, and time by claiming the expert right to archive documents in the pursuit of "objective" knowledge.

[Fig. 1. The archivist]. The technology of the document and the archive is constitutive of both political regimes and scholarship, and our imaginations have been taught to accept that freedom is something that can be *given* with documents: "manumission," the Emancipation Proclamation, the Declaration of Independence. In other words, rather than asking where the reparations are for all these crimes, citizen-scholars are trained to accept that the end of an organized crime such as slavery could be materialized in a document, rather than in a world made habitable again, a world where reparations fertilize the recovery of other types of relationships between people. The status of reparations in today's scholarship — either a topic of research or completely absent — is a sign of the extent to which scholarship is less embedded in the world than in the institutions of archives, museums, and libraries.

Unlearning imperialism is in some ways unlearning these 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. We must withdraw from three main things: First, the pursuit of the new — the "ground-breaking" — that is the incentive for scholars to be rewarded, and justifies the destructive imperial project of always seeking out the new, insisting on progress, and sealing violence safely in the past. Second, the excess of imperial rights that enable experts to continue to manufacture

people's worlds with imperial tools that disavow the original dispossession and produce new documents, like reforms, amendments, and "Human Rights." Third, the naturalization of documents and documentation practices (the archive, the museum) that enforce an imperial separation between people and the objects with which they co-created their worlds.

Together, these three premises keep the horizon of reparations far from us, even if we are critical and anti-imperialist scholars. Scholarship works as a kind of imperial tax paid to disciplinary precedents, a tax that keeps events ordered in chronological order, discrete in space and time, cleanly past and the private territory of scholars who wrote about them; a tax that ensures that whenever the question of justice comes to the fore, it is always already in relation to past crimes, crimes that scholars must accept and study, not continue to refuse.

### **Free Renty**

[Fig. 2 Free Renty] In March of last year, Tamara Lanier, the descendant of Renty Taylor who was kidnapped from Africa and enslaved in Virginia, [filed a lawsuit](#) against Harvard University and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Renty and his daughter Delia, who was also forced into slavery, were "forced to pose for the daguerreotypes without consent, dignity and compensation" (p. 3, lawsuit). These images, initiated by Harvard's resident scientist and racial taxonomer Louis Agassiz, now held in Harvard's Peabody Museum, were used to perpetuate, illustrate, and define the conditions of slavery.

Lanier’s lawsuit can be read as a restitution claim, and indeed, included among the list of requests for relief is a demand for “immediate restitution of the daguerreotype” to Lanier herself, as a descendant of Renty and Delia. This well-documented and thoughtfully argued claim is in itself a huge achievement. The lawsuit however, is also an exemplary case of potential history, since it rejects the idea that imperial violence, by proxy of academia, can define the status of objects or the relationship of objects with their people. The issue for Lanier is not about having or not having access to the image of her great-great-grandfather — after all, the image was published enough times for her to scan, download, and print it. It is also not, I’m assuming, about ownership of an “original” daguerreotype, which would be, as I’ve argued, an imperial conception. Rather, the issue is about the right to name and to define, the right to repair and care for relationships outside of the terms set by imperial institutions, 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. This is not a precious daguerreotype, Lanier claims; this image is family.

The image, Lanier and her lawyers argue, was *seized* from Renty Taylor . This is a crucial challenge to imperial temporality. Taylor never had the chance to hold his image, since it was made Agassiz’s property before it was even produced, and then became Harvard’s property. This means that what was *seized* from him was not the object — the mirror-like silver surface — but the image that materialized on it. In using this term, Lanier’s lawsuit challenges the institutionalization of images and documents as defined by their ontological separateness from the people against whom they were produced and used. . Lanier’s lawsuit reminds us that images are not neutral — nor is the

daguerreotype — and foregrounds the continuation of slavery’s violence through their circulation, ownership, and display.

Rather than inhabiting the position of bystanders and waiting from the outside to see how the case will unfold in court, scholars and museum workers should jump forward and use the opportunity to endorse, envisage, experiment, rehearse, and pursue reparations. Imagine the radical implications this could have. One doesn’t have to wait for a court verdict to inhabit the anti-imperial temporality — bound by Harvard for 169 years — offered by Lanier: we should all endorse the call to “Free Renty!”

Let’s consider how photography, specifically, could be used in the reparative work of potential history. To start, photography was imperial from the very beginning, as I explain throughout my book. It was shaped and institutionalized to facilitate the reproduction of imperial rights, already acquired through other technologies of forcible extraction. We were trained not to think about photography in terms of extraction and accumulation, but rather, in the way we are trained to think about democracy or freedom, with its dissemination considered an unquestionable good. Photography is a technology not because of its modern machinery and equipment, but rather because it controls and regulates people’s movement, gestures, and actions, while also forcing them to act as its operators. Photography could not exist without the labor, presence, and consent of people, who are made its organic raw material. Consent is limited, and kept for special occasions — and for certain people. Vis-à-vis enslaved, colonized, and dispossessed people, the consent to be photographed is assumed to be superfluous, for isn’t it true that photography was always in pursuit of the bien-être of progress itself? In other words, for photography to become omnipresent on a global scale, people’s interfere with its smooth

operation had to be minimized or foreclosed. The negation of people's right to actively participate in the event of photography — let alone consent to being photographed — is the outcome of the extractive principle upon which photography has been institutionalized.

One is tempted to say that photographed persons in general, not only enslaved persons like Renty Taylor, are rarely asked to consent to being photographed. This is true only if one relates to photography as the discrete moment when a photograph is being taken. When we depart from these discrete events and look at photography as an imperial technology of extraction, globally operative since the mid-19th century, the illusion of universality emblemized in the 'anyone' collapses and the racial labor division and accumulation of visual wealth for domination and profit becomes undeniably perceptible. Similar to other imperial technologies, photography made visible the communities from which visual wealth was extracted (for example, in the colonies) and offered them very little in return.

To illustrate this, let's recall that populations who are photographed as dispossessed are confirmed as such through photography, while others are invited to *regard their pain* with the enjoyment of either power or of sympathy. Even when their consent was not asked with each click of a camera, those who were the recognized members of imperial societies could advocate their right to shape the world in which their photographs could be taken and the right to take photographs of others without consent. Renty and Delia Taylor were forced to enter the photographer's studio — the site par excellence where consent to one's portrait was the cultivated exception — for their portraits to be extracted. Those who forced them, and those who inherited access rights to

this accumulated wealth, could then study their photographs as “science” or “ethnology” or “anthropology” or “history” or “art,” and expertly archive them or display them on museum walls. Further, they enjoyed the power of expropriating the rights of others, expropriation that photography not only made visible but perpetuated. Photographs helped make others into property. The ability to take photographs was an imperial right.

It is this division of labor and the conditions for its reproduction that Lanier’s complaint disrupts. Lanier argues that: “Slavery was abolished 156 years ago, but Renty and Delia remain enslaved in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Their images, like their bodies before, remain subject to control and appropriation by the powerful, and their familial identities are denied to them.”

When slaves who were denied the right to give their consent in all other domains of life — speak, photography, which was institutionalized to mark their exclusion, loses its legitimacy. Denying Renty and Delia the right to speak, in person or through their descendants, is, Lanier’s lawsuit argues, an infringement of the Thirteenth Amendment that “outlaws — and provides a cause of action to redress — core components and incidents of slavery.”

In this lawsuit, Tamara Lanier inhabits the position of her ancestor, Renty Taylor, whose image was “seized” in the formative first decade of photography; thus she attends to the origins of photography and reclaims a series of expropriated rights. The transfer of the daguerreotype from Harvard to her hands means finally letting Renty Taylor free. Not only will he regain his rightful place with his family, but reparations will begin. Reparations materialize when perpetrators and their inheritors are denied their imperial rights. Lanier’s lawsuit allows us to understand reparations in an indefinitely radical way,



one that goes far beyond the daguerreotype being returned. It is potential history: the restitution of the right to participate differently, the right to shape what photography will become after 1850, a participation that was denied to Renty Taylor and to African Americans in general.

Photography can play a major role in slavery's continued abolition and in the practice of reparations. For this to happen, we should be inspired by Lanier's claim and actively call for a reversal of the premises on which photography was imperially instituted. We should deny, denounce, renounce, disown the exclusive rights to guard what could not have come become property without the brutal exclusion of others — documents, art, photographs, knowledge. This plundered wealth, accumulated in museums and archives, should be opened to communities dispossessed by its accumulation, and under their guidance and with their participation, photography can be shaped anew. This is one small way that the academy can rejoin the world and partake in its repair.