

# Unearthling Traces

Dismantling imperialist entanglements of archives, landscapes, and the built environment

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Uneven Distances. On the Limits of Transmission:  
Acts of Remaining and Means of Reappearance  
of the Sahara

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*Pasts* are populated by events and practices characterized by their distances to our existences. These distances are plural in qualities; they can be temporal—a long time ago—spatial—there, far from me—affective—I am not touched anymore—epistemic—I don't understand yet/anymore—etc. These distances are a multitude of ways to relate to what has happened. They create ecologies of proximities on which the possibility of our presents and the construction of our common histories rely.

However, these distances are not only produced by time. They also are the product of social and historical constructions, shaped by multiple forces that delimit what can be said about what has happened.<sup>1</sup> *Pasts* are a field of forces in the present in which our relations to worlds, events, and plural temporalities are produced and reproduced, done and undone. This field is engineered by infrastructures, techniques, and practices of distancing, and although they can be destructive, reparative, or both, these distances are also the proximities that enable us to relate to worlds and bodies. Amongst these infrastructures are the archives, the repertoire, dance, poetry, cooking practices, histories, historical discourses, sciences, arts, etc.

“Several silent beings like Dah live here [...].”

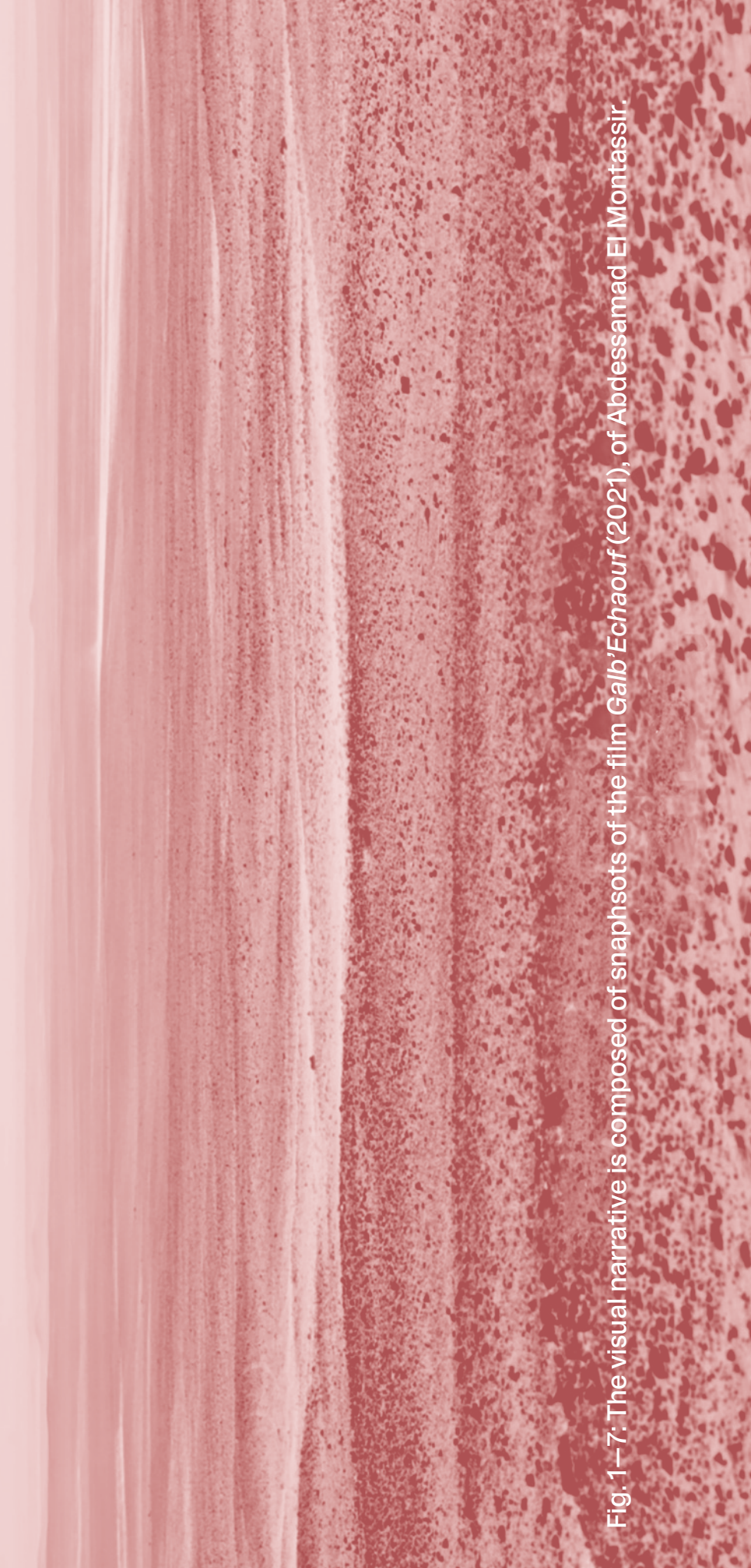


Fig. 1–7: The visual narrative is composed of snapshots of the film *Galb'Echaouf* (2021), of Abdessamad El Montassir.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay wrote: “And if there was no past, and if the past was the invention of the imperial archive?”<sup>2</sup>

And what if what we call *pasts* were infrastructures of distancing? And what if what has been relegated to a past radically past was in fact there, still in place and time, inhabiting the human and non-human bodies marked by what has happened, and in the bodies of the one succeeding them?

Azoulay, amongst many others, leads us on a path to understanding the kind of distances that are produced by *past pasts* as an infrastructure, and what are its instruments. One of these instruments is chronology. The arrangement of temporalities in a linear succession of moments<sup>3</sup>—*pasts* as being more and more distant, the future closer and closer, the present in the middle—naturalizes an affective distance with *pasts*. It enforces a parallelism between affective and temporal distances. In this relation established by the philosophical and scientific discourse of Western thought, the more a past is distant chronologically, the less it affects us.

Classifying events, human and non-human bodies, knowledge, realities, practices as being in past pasts enables us to create distances with them while depriving them of their potential futurities.<sup>4</sup> The Imperial Archive and its gestures of removal from worlds is another instrument of *pasts* as infrastructure, de-membering ecologies of proximities and destroying the spatio-temporal relations between human and non-human bodies and their knowledge. While arranging the temporalities in a chronological way, that is to say, linear, the Imperial Archive naturalizes the affective distance with worlds and destroys them by relegating them to a *past past*.

Another instrument of this infrastructure is the dominant historical discourse that translates the archive from within the places of *official knowledge production*. It creates authority and legitimacy around the Archives and their practices, in defining what can be said and what can be thought of the *pasts* by enclosing them within the walls of their sources and chronology. The historical discourse then produces what has been coined as subjugations,<sup>5</sup> dispossessing “the vast majority of knowledge keepers, forever relegating their knowledge to witchcraft, tradition, superstition, folkways or, at best, some form of common sense.”<sup>6</sup>

“The land witnessed many atrocities that I can’t describe. [...]”



Nevertheless, *pasts*, the Imperial Archive, the historical discourse and chronologies are not the only infrastructures and instruments of distancing; many others produce distances, which can be physical, material, social, ecological, psychic, symbolic, epistemic, etc. They are often entangled, superimposed, or overlapping, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts, to efficiently de-member ecologies of knowledge and proximities between human and non-human bodies, their knowledge, practices, and memories.

These uneven distances then inscribe themselves in the flesh of human and non-human bodies, which keep in themselves the traces of what is affecting them, as hosts and traces of silences. As grounds on which to reenact contact zones<sup>7</sup> with temporalities that escaped us, these uneven distances are manifold sources to learn what is happening and what has happened, prior even to the infrastructures of distancing.

How can we make our relationship to distance a source of common history and not an infrastructure for imperialist domination?

How to relate to traumas and silences through the traces of their erasure, by the distance that separates us? How to relate to these buried memories, which remain in place despite everything, minor and latent around and through us? How to do so while respecting the right to forget, the right to the distance to which our bodies are entitled?

If human bodies can't speak, the histories that shaped this silence are told and transmitted in temporalities that elude us. Khadija, in Galb'Echaouf, can't speak. The land she comes from lives what she can't describe, while her knowledge and memories don't have access to language. Khadija exercised her right to distance, a distance that protects her from the pain of proximity, from the torments of affect.

Her lands, which keep within them the traces of what affects them, are inhabited by plural forms of life, each of them transmitting parallel histories. In the Sahara, life is encounter, hybridation, creolization of these life forms weaving themselves together in an assemblage of human and non-human bodies. While the trajectories of resistance and survival do not meet or no longer meet, they come from the same space-time, the Sahara.

“Go and ask the ruins, the desert, its thorny plants, [...]. They saw and lived through everything, and have remained there. They can better tell of what happened than those of us now far away, we can’t express it.”



أ.تيل، الغلركة، الدفلة، الدغموس (Atila, Eddafla, El Ralga, Daghmous) These plants lived through the atrocities that Khadija can't speak of. Unlike sugar cane or rubber trees, these plant lives do not carry political, colonial, and post-colonial histories known to all. These plants tell other stories, other trajectories.

A legend about the plant دغموس (daghmous) tells us that they were "beautiful and always in flower, that their leaves were green all year long. And one day, their leaves turned into spikes."

While the bodies of the دغموس cannot move, or only a little, while they spend their lives where they are rooted, their bodies are active. They perceive, interact with the ecologies they belong to and which belong to them. Within these relational fields of plural and complex temporalities, the دغموس produce and reproduce the sensible interaction and ecologies of proximities that are the Sahara and its landscape. And if the temporalities of these relations elude us, if our distance with them is too wide, these bodies will still bear witness to and transmit the memories of these *pasts* that our languages and temporalities can't describe.

And I wonder, how can we understand something we have not experienced but of which we keep the traces deep inside ourselves?

When we cross this vast desert, the plants and the mountains remember our traces, and our stories spread into places we have not yet traveled through.

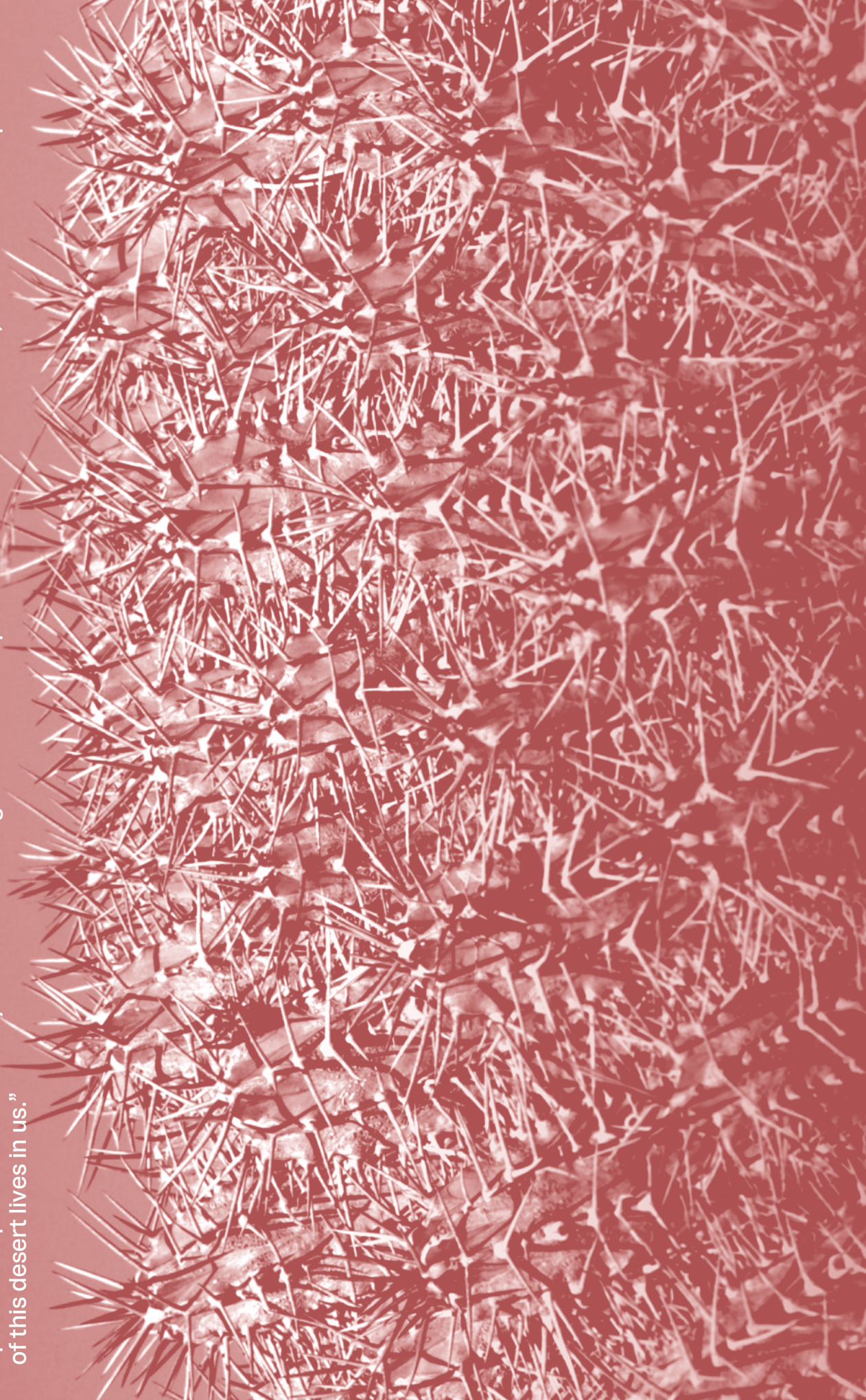
An unknown part of us lives in this desert, and an unknown part of this desert lives in us.

How to re-member something we have not experienced but whose traces we keep deep inside ourselves? How to re-member our proximities with distanced *pasts* without denying these distances? Which hospitalities can we reenact, just like so many contact zones with temporalities that we cannot yet understand or no longer understand, "temporalities that elude us"?

The دغموس remember. Even if the ecologies of knowledge and proximities that enacted their previous lives have been destroyed, de-membered, the events put at a distance, beyond human listening, the دغموس actualizes past proximities in the present as corporealities. Each



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molecular, cellular, mineral, animal, living, plant, or dead body of the Sahara exerts pressure on the presents, re-articulating their proximities, re-remembering them. Within these damaged ecologies, de-membered by Imperial infrastructures of distancing, memories, omissions, and ghosts inhabit, act upon, and produce the presents. It is there, at the surface of our distances with these ecologies, that lie those contact zones, like multiple horizons of repair.

Walter Benjamin wrote: “Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”<sup>8</sup>

Which practices, which gestures should be employed to reenact these contact zones, to transform these uneven distances into sources of common histories? How to re-member (with) this knowledge that we don’t yet hold or no longer hold?

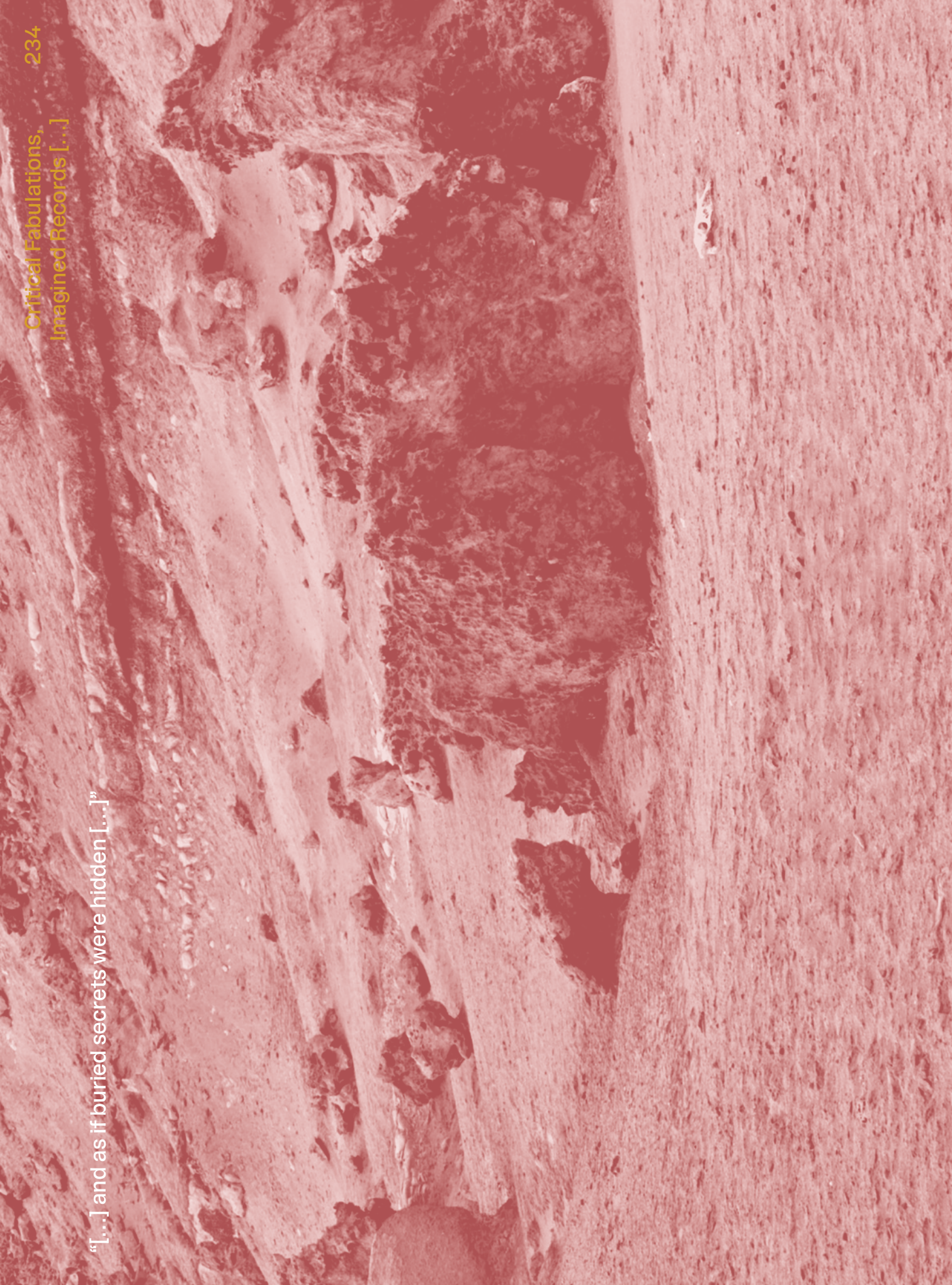
The histories we share with human and non-human bodies are common. If nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history, these histories that have been buried, de-membered, distanced, still exist in the words of those we can’t listen to and in the bodies whose temporalities elude us and our distances to them. It is not about methods, tools, or strategies.

Azoulay also said: “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.”<sup>9</sup>

It cannot be new. What if there were no alternative histories just like there are no *pasts*? What if the mirage of alternative histories was another infrastructure of distancing with presents, pasts, futures, future pasts, and past futures? It would then not be about new methodologies for an alternative history, but a question of building new facts to contest the Imperial Archive, chronologies, and the historical discourse.

It would then be about repair. It would then be about hospitality. Hospitality to the unknown part of us that lives beyond our skin and to the unknown parts of worlds that live in our flesh. Re-member to re-embody these *pasts* and our common histories that we have inherited. Re-member (with) these crypts in our languages and

“[...] and as if buried secrets were hidden [...]”



with these uneven distances to reenact contact zones. Contact zones with histories and *pasts* not to create distant objects, but common corporealities. It would then be about listening to what we cannot yet understand or no longer understand, like traces of broken relations. It would then be about gestures of hospitalities that enable repair and imagination, of solidarities with our common histories.

This plant is the only witness that can recount what Khadija cannot. But it is like Khadija: it speaks in a temporality that eludes us.

Here, poetry and fiction enable us to augment the surface of these contact zones with temporalities that elude us, without us having to pretend that we understand them. They build a relationship with plural alterity. Omissions, lacks, silences, hollows, distances are so many realities that poetry doesn't reduce. An intimate leap between the *us* and the non-human bodies speaking to us without possible translations, it opens to an incompressible and incomprehensible coexistence. As written by poet Audre Lorde: "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought."<sup>10</sup>

Poetry is made of the crypts we inherited from generation to generation, full of what cannot yet be said or that can no longer be said, materializing the presence of absences, re-memorizing the knowledge that has been detached from us and the devastated ecologies of knowledge resulting from this violence. When there is only the nothing, the emptiness, the absences, the ghosts, the distances left behind, when our histories and memories have been relegated, confiscated, when they can't be transmitted, relayed or told, then, we have these absences and distances to transmit, maintain, cherish, and love. So many distances become a source of common histories of forgetfulness narrated by the spines of دغموس.

Poetry and fiction are not a luxury. They answer to uneven distances, while transmitting knowledge and experiences that cannot be told, that elude us. They give space to minor and latent histories as potentialities

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for getting in contact with them, to re-member them. And if poetries and fictions don't have access to the adjective *real* and don't restitute *pasts trustfully*, they build our relations to *pasts* and memories, and shape social and political bonds to worlds and bodies.

The poetries of the Sahara build relationships to worlds and transmit what couldn't have been. Through them our common histories inhabit and shape the present, grounds for peaceful reconciliation. Saidyia Hartman wrote:

History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror. I wanted to write a romance that exceeded the fictions of history—the rumors, scandals, lies, invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts, impossible metaphors, chance events, and fantasies that constitute the archive and determine what can be said about the past. I longed to write a new story, one unfettered by the constraints of the legal documents and exceeding the restatement and transpositions, which comprised my strategy for disordering and transgressing the protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements and which enabled me to augment and intensify its fictions.<sup>11</sup>

Poetry and fiction to open the determinism of archives on what can be said about what has happened or what is happening, as remembrance and knowledge with what cannot yet or can no longer be understood, on temporalities that elude us. Our uneven distances to *pasts* not as obstacles but as songs, traces, documents, and sources of common histories.



Julien Lafontaine Carboni is an architect. They graduated at ENSA Paris-Malaquais and defended the thesis "(from) the repertoire: an architectural theory of operations. Oral and embodied knowledge in architectural and spatial practices" at EPFL in April 2022. Julien has published in several architectural, philosophical, and anthropological journals such as *Architecture and Culture*, *Charrette*, *GTA Papers*, and *Tabula Rasa*. They investigate repertoires (repositories of oral and embodied knowledge) as mechanism of transmissions, media and collective structure of conservation of architectural knowledge, implying historicities and epistemologies concealed by the architectural disciplinarization. Their aim is to frame an architectural political agency that resides in gestures and the depth of fleshes in proposing an embodied architectural historiography which threads undrawn spatialities, reenactment and performativity as media of queer and decolonial architectural cultures. Their research is enriched by a teaching practice through radical pedagogies, curatorial practices as well as by institutional activism in the DRAGLab, EPFL.

Abdessamad El Montassir is a multi-disciplinary artist, whose research is centered on a trilogy: the right to forget, fictional and visceral narratives, and the trauma of anticipation. In his body of work and research, the artist sets reflexive processes that invite us to rethink history and cartographies through collective or fictional narratives and immaterial archives. His projects also question traumas and their impacts on individuals, their behavior, and their socio-political evolution, and reveal processes where these traumas serve historization. Abdessamad El Montassir tackles these problematics while taking into consideration knowledge on non-human identities—plants in order to trigger the emergence of renewed ways of thinking about our environments.



- 1 Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société: cours au Collège de France, 1975–1976*, Hautes Études (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1997) and Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.
- 2 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso Books, 2019), 189, [yale.idm.oclc.org/login?URL=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2033650](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2033650).
- 3 Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, [doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015).
- 4 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994); David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014).
- 5 Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société: cours au Collège de France, 1975–1976*.
- 6 Budd L. Hall and Rajesh Tandon, “Decolonization of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education,” *Research for All* (January 1, 2017): 8, [doi.org/10.18546/RFA.01.1.02](https://doi.org/10.18546/RFA.01.1.02).
- 7 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, [1968] 1986), 254.
- 9 Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism*, 198.
- 10 Audre Lorde, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* (London: Penguin UK, [1999] 2018).
- 11 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 9.