This essay is an extension of several dissertation chapters, currently titled “Violence & Provenance: The Transmission of Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems and Sasha Huber.” I would like to thank Fatima El-Rehy, Page Dolfield, Grace Kye, Michelena Casswell, Thia Bryant, Daniele Hurlburt, Yonca Fodor, Samja Bae, Dennis Childs, Lucas de Lima, Bhanu Kapil, Lara Insall, Marquita Bullock, Gregory Layser, Don Me Chisholm, Michael Farley, Alita Griffin for guidance and encouragement throughout every stage of this essay, especially during the early stages of its development and the final revision. I would like to thank my doctoral committee, and Sasha Huber for her feedback on an earlier draft and I am forever grateful for her encouragement and advice. I would like to thank the editors at Geography, Martin Redish, Jeffrey Malcuit and Maia Haitham, for their editorial counsel and for publishing this oddly formed essay.

2 Samuel Morton was a doctor, professor and a notable collector of human skulls. He authored A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aborigines of North and South America in which he used specimens to establish species, published in 1839.

3 This is from Agassiz’s letter to his mother concerning his life in Boston and his feelings towards them. Agassiz to his mother, December 1846 (Houghton Library, Harvard University).

4 This paragraph comes from one of my dissertation chapters, currently titled “Violence & Provenance: The Appropriation and Transmission of Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems and Sasha Huber.”

5 This was titled the “Thayer Exhibition” and spanned 1865–1866.

6 In “Traces of Louis Agassiz’s Photography Body and Science: Watercolor and Story,” Maria Helena P. T. Machado and Sasha Huber explain why the South Carolina and Brazil daguerreotypes Agassiz produced can be interpreted as “subversive.” The Brazilian daguerreotypes matched the public eye. The delicate photograms of push-bottom New England, along with Louis Agassiz’s own loss of scientific credibility following the publication of Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species, prevented him from making public what was to be his definitive work in establishing the inferiority of blacks and the life of hybrids.” Maria Helena P. T. Machado and Sasha Huber (n.d.), in: Louis Agassiz’s Photography Body and Science: Watercolor and Story (San Paulo Capaceos, 2010), 26.

7 This is a term I've been borrowing from Sasha Huber explain why the transmission of leftist printed matter is an affecting exploration of the birth, death, and resurrection of alternative futures. I encountered one version of this in the workplace of an anonymous radical cell.

8 One of my favorite projects was in a shabby concrete shop, then through the windshield of a car winding down the highway. They are in relentless motion without an obvious destination, such that their faces are never seen—as if they were photographed by the agent-gent. Andrea Lorde writes: “I am more interested in black feminist poetics, “A No-Modernity” has been theorized by Michael Hardt, and the Watts Writers Workshop examined in Black Arts West Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles, by Daniel Widener (Duke University Press, 2010), to name a few formative examples.

9 In a third, darkened room, two videos were being watched, an archive of leftist printed matter: “AN IMPULSE THAT KEEPS RETURNING**: A CONVERSATION WITH BASEL ABBAS AND RUANNE ABOU-RAHMEH.


11 “This paragraph is indebted to Archivists, Carceral Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 160.

12 This argument is indebted to Archivists, Carceral Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 160.

13 This was stated during her talk, “The Ethics of White Supremacy,” at the “Thinking in its Presence, Race & ‘Writing’ conference at the University of Montana in 2005.

14 This is a term I’ve been using to describe the works of Santiago Sierra. See my article, “Heirlooms Aesthetic: 390 Cm Tall Tower of 40 Peds People,” Laterali 4 (2015).

15 Here is an affecting exploration of the birth, death, and resurrection of alternative futures.

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22 For full text and petition see www.rentyhorn.ch.

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26 This paragraph is indebted to Archivists, Carceral Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 160.
impotence of action and the search for poetic act."
Placing the depopulated and inscrutable landscape beside the superabundant archive, Abbas and Abou-Rahme stage a crucial drama of inheritance. How, The Incidental Insurgents asks, can the revolutionary energies of a bygone moment re-animate politics in the present? How might one locate the weak but persistent signals of past futures in the contemporary terrain—in the soil, or in ruined buildings, or concealed beneath the surfaces of ordinary life? How could we discover the potential for another world that saturates this one?

In the videos the two protagonists could reactivate in some sense. In the videos the two protagonists could reactivate in some sense. Of course, at some point, we also saw them as failures rather than as a process that remains dynamic, that is still ongoing and which could continue to resonate across space and time.

R The Incidental Insurgents project emerged in relation to a few different situations. In Palestine nothing was happening, really. Meanwhile the various uprisings were taking off in the Arab world. And it seemed that, while ordinary people were ready to go to the furthest limits, there was no political language yet to address the question of “what will you do the day after?” It was unclear then, and it’s still unclear to us. At the same time we were also feeling totally overwhelmed by a widespread apocalyptic imaginary that is just growing stronger and stronger; a sense of there being no future, no possibility, but instead a perpetual crisis that is being constantly stage-managed. ISIS—which we approach as a kind of counter-attack or counterinsurgency in the Arab world—is in truth just the latest apocalyptic scenario.

So the project works on these different levels. We’re trying to critically confront the mythology around these past revolutionary movements, and we’re also confronting the production of a stunted imagination where nothing, so to speak, is possible, and that we are simply meant to move from one crisis to the next.

The project rests between these points, between revolutionary mythology and perpetual crisis. The Incidental Insurgents tries to recover figures who seem really insignificant, who really aren’t so important, or who have been written out of...

They’re very much on the fringes—R Out of the revolutionary narrative. But we are interested in them to the extent that they continue to expose contemporary gaps and absences. They show us what’s missing. We didn’t want to romanticize them, to say, “You know, now let’s be a bunch of anarchist bandits.” The work is about discovering moments we might reflect on, and perhaps reactivate in some sense.

In the videos the two protagonists could...
They could stand in for any of the historical figures in the installation—Victor Serge, Abu Jildeh, etc.—and they could stand in for us. But they don’t get anywhere.

They are interesting. Especially in the first of the three parts, they arrive at a series of dead ends. The search that arrives at impossibilities is expressed really strongly in one of the sampled texts by Boloña: “The impotence of action and the search for the poetic act.” We are focused on that kind of movement, there is something searching for a different way of being in the given world, or a way to break out from it, but you are coming up against the limits of possibility.

Of course, the comic book video they’re also seen standing by a fire. We’re interested in the question of what you can reclaim from the ashes of revolutionary mythology, what is the specific question of what you can reclaim from the ashes of Palestine Industry. And they could stand in for the part of the Palestinian, which means producing certain kinds of aesthetic forms and certain kinds of representations. We’re hyper-aware of it, not just in the arts but as a political phenomenon as well. We come from a different kind of tradition. Obviously I’m with the liberation struggle. But I’m not with the invention of the liberation struggle in the sense of building a nation-state. We’ve seen Palestine reduced to the mere idea of a state. It has gone from an idea of a nation to the idea of a state. And even before the nation it was much more about a homeland. As artists, it was really important for us not to reproduce “Palestine” and “Palestine Art” as such. But then how can you confront it? We grew up in Palestine, but left when we were seventeen. And when we went back, for the longest time it felt impossible to pick up a camera there, to shoot anything, precisely for the reason that there were so many images circulating of Palestine, all of which seemed banal. It was important for us to think of Palestine as a laboratory for things happening elsewhere. That’s how we think about Palestine, and when we film it’s far less about it being truly a “representation” of Palestine than as a cipher for something else: in part, to refuse the singularity of Palestine, the approach to Palestine as an exceptional set of circumstances.

In our films when we consider the landscape, we’re trying to make connections between moments that at first seem totally disconnected. Palestine has been represented as a singular set of circumstances, and this is obviously connected to the stunting and stagnation of a wider political imagination. For us, existing materials that speak of a multiplicity of people, all just grabbing what you can and stay comfortable. So how do we think about this anxiety, and the kinds of action that it seems to rule out? These are important questions for us.

If you can’t simply wrap yourself in the apocalyptic imaginary quite explicitly. The apocalyptic is a feeling that really does have a hold on us now. In the Arab world it’s ISIS, in the U.S. it’s a cocktail of fatal infectious diseases, catastrophic weather, and “terrorism.” There’s a constant production of anxiety, of a feeling that everything is about to end, and that you’ve got to grab what you can and stay comfortable. So how do we think about this anxiety, and the kinds of action that it seems to rule out? These are important questions for us.

The Palestinian bandit Abu Jildeh was an interesting character for us to re-introduce into the present. Abu Jildeh was at one point very well known in Palestine, but the PLO decided to sort of abandon the image of the peasant. The “Palestinian” became an urbanite, you could say. That was a step that they preferred to project.

Furthermore, the Palestinian elite did not really take much of a liking to Abu Jildeh. He stole and took up against the limits of possibility. And they never arrive.

Years,” we sample Ruanne’s father saying: “I was a part of the communist party for a while, but I found it tiring and boring.”

All the figures we work with are in some way not necessarily members of the anarchist movement in a specific sense. We are certainly reacting to an absolute obsession with the state, with the idea of a state. Clearly, power can operate outside of the confines of the state. And yet there is always a return to the idea of the state. So the anarchic runs through our whole work, and we’re trying to make connections between different spaces and times.

What really connects these different figures and moments is the anarchic impulse, an impulse that never seems to die and is always returning. Very often, artists who are Palestinians are framed by their “Palestinianism.” You’re always a Palestinian artist first. So much of our practice has been about refusing that, and refusing the ghettoization of Palestine in the sense of a singular experience, which is completely absurd to us. If you look back to the 1970s, Palestine was at a point where it was other places, and that has become a crucial part of our practice—that it could be Palestine, it could be anywhere.

There are Palestinian artists—it’s a serious political problem—who can’t move beyond these overexposed symbols. In this way they’re just like the political parties. Young people sometimes re-adopt them, because these symbols actually have a real meaning for people and once upon a time they had their potency. But the repetition is really problematic. If you and the official state parties are using the same images and the same symbols, then you’re already co-opted. But you saw that this is happening in Palestine. And if it affects our practice and the images we can produce.

That’s why so much of our practice is somehow “archival” in the most expanded sense. (For us archives are constantly being constituted and include everything from online video clips and images produced today, to tweets, file shares, and documentary photos.) We’re trying to look at the present and its impossibilities from new and different vantage points. This is the attraction of finding overlaps and intersections between moments that at first seem totally disconnected. Palestine has been represented as a single set of circumstances, and this is obviously connected to the stunting and stagnation of a wider political imagination. For us, existing materials that speak of a multiplicity of people, all just grabbing what you can and stay comfortable, so how do we think about this anxiety, and the kinds of action that it seems to rule out? These are important questions for us.

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Furthermore, the Palestinian elite did not really take much of a liking to Abu Jildeh. He stole and fought the settlers and the British occupation, but he also stole from rich Palestinians (whom he saw as direct collaborators with the British) and gave to the poor. So Abu Jildeh came to be written off as a mere criminal by many. For us, he reveals the important intersection of colonialism with capitalism. And the way the political parties are using the same images and the same symbols, then you’re already co-opted. But you saw that this is happening in Palestine. And if it affects our practice and the images we can produce.

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interested in what kinds of new connections can be made. About how the work cannot fulfill that kind of orientalist demand. Our work is very much about how to resist such setups. We ultimately don’t want to be involved in a reproduction of a very colonial relationship to the Arab world, you know: “These artists are Arab artists, they’re not just artists. Only white male artists are artists.”

 Everyone else is marked in some way.

 R You are art’s others, and we’re going to create a show—

 B Just for you guys. I think that there are artists that have also played a role in this dynamic, in fulfilling a certain set of expectations. Even in the basic visual forms they produce, so not just politically and discursively, but also formally. Of course, at the same time there are a large number of artists from the Arab world and all over that have successfully moved beyond that and continue to break outside of these representations.

 C You spoke earlier about the particular “urgency” of the present moment, but also about your suspicion of a dominant atmosphere of constant “crisis,” which by contrast seems somehow staged or dramatized.

 R It’s a strange thing: you’re responding critically to the production of crisis and urgency, and at the same time you can’t help but be sympathetic. You are in the grip of this urgency—it’s what calls you to work on these issues—and you can’t easily get out of them.

 B And you start questioning your practice, and what it means to be an artist, especially in these moments. Who cares about what you’re doing? This was especially true when the Arab revolutions began. In Palestine we were physically distant from Tunisia and Egypt. But we were online all day; we were totally intoxicated by it. So you start to ask questions like, “What if it arrives here?” or “What would you do if you were in Egypt, if you were in Tunis?” Who cares about being an artist in those circumstances? And today a similar urgency comes from the total collapse of communities in Iraq and Syria. The crisis is clearly produced, and you want to remain sceptical of so much crisis discourse, yet you can’t escape it entirely.

 B Invariably our work assumes a distance at certain points. What we are trying to do with our process is to shift our gaze on events. Or to shift the way we’re thinking through events. There’s some proximity and some distance at the same time. We can’t work on anything we don’t feel strongly about ourselves. We don’t have an abstract interest in politics. For us the political is really about how we carry out our lives.

 R It’s about the ability to reproduce our daily life.

 B And so, the very daily things that politicize people, that cause them to act.

 C Is this sense of urgency and involvement reflected in work that you make, or in the venues and situations where you show that work?

 R We’re aware that there’s no outside, as in you’re very rarely operating outside the structures of power, especially if you want to survive and make a living from your artistic practice. On a day-to-day basis, and even in everyday life, we’re constantly picking our battles. For example, in Ramallah, we have found that at this point the format of the “exhibition” is pointless. The same people from the same institutions attend the show, you know all of them, and you could have invited them to your living room and showed the work on a better projector and speakers. At the same time, the feeling is that for the most part, most institutions don’t seem interested in actually engaging with the public via exhibitions. Perhaps they prefer to engage with the public in other forms, but then why would I want to exhibit? I have been to shows in Ramallah where the text was in English and French, because the French consulate had organized it. It’s free admission, but the majority of the people can’t really engage with the material if it’s only in English and French.

 In Jerusalem, for example, it’s a very different situation for art spaces. They’re outside the rubric of the Palestinian Authority, and Western donors don’t fund them in the same way they fund spaces in the West Bank. Mainly because you have to fall in line with their political agenda, which is one that most Palestinians refuse. The political agenda being to empty Jerusalem out of Palestinians, so that Ramallah replaces Jerusalem as the capital/centre for Palestinians.
So it becomes important to maintain a Palestinian presence in Jerusalem. Naturally it's a very different atmosphere than in Ramallah, a much larger part of the community does actually come to the 4800, engage in a level of engagement, happening. Actually, we first showed The Incidental Insurgents: The Part About The Bandits at Al Ma'mal in Jerusalem for their annual Jerusalem show. For example, at the opening there were former political prisoners taking photos of some of the sampled Victor Serge text in the work. And despite the success in Palestine and not always as "artists." We found these forms to be much more potent for the context of Ramallah and other areas in the West Bank. These attempts, or interventions, that happen in the community, outside of any "art" context, but that we prefer to not speak of as such, are something that would defeat the anonymity. At the same time, I find it superficial to parachute into another community and try to replicate something like that. Of course, we're more conflated and more compromised. There were far fewer contradictions between what he believed in and his actual practice. But now things are more conflated and more compromised. The actual forms that we're working with are anonymous, to reappear as another figure, something that's very much connected to me and radicalized by these particular resources? The impulse was imprinted in a completely different form. And yet the impulse was imprinted in this vanguard meeting space run by a bunch of leftist communist friends who refused to be part of the communist party; it was totally self-financed. Actually, it started as a meeting space, people from politics would go there, and from politics, people from the factions, people from all the political factions, and outside the factions would meet there, which is incredible, and soon after started the publishing house.

They lived communally above the space as well. It was a totally self-financed project. They refused any affiliation with the existing factions. They worked on job to earn money to publish their books. The space and the publishing house had a huge impact at the time. They had a wide circulation of these independent books, because they were taking them out to different villages and towns. It was a very interesting experiment for us to reflect on. Practices of writing and publishing became very significant to us, especially for the second part of the trilogy. Victor Serge, you know, is in prison, where he nearly dies, and...

B He decides to write as a reason to go on. Writing as bearing witness becomes his reason for living. In these conversations we had with my father, we felt there was a lot more integrity between his ideas and his practice. He didn't compromise. And when he couldn't continue insurrectionary practice, he closed the space.

C How did it end?
B The only way that he could go on was getting funding from outside, basically.

C Well yes, but also he had...

"An Impulse that Keeps Returning"