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## From what distance are things clear?

*From what distance are things clear?* untersucht, wie politischer Raum durch verschiedene Architekturen und Formen der Reterritorialisierung wiederhergestellt wird. Indem Fragmente von Fotografien, Texten und Illustrationen zu einer architektonischen Sprache zusammengesetzt werden, die von den dominanten Rahmungen des Archivs abweicht, bedient sich dieses Projekt einer archäologischen Logik, um neue Notationsformen zu erarbeiten. Die Bibliothek von Alexandria ist als kulturgeschichtliches Symbol der Ausgangspunkt von *From what distance are things clear?*, das für unbeantwortete Fragen und Lücken in der Geschichtsschreibung steht. Wer wird aus der Geschichte herausgeschrieben und welche Hierarchien folgen daraus? Das gegenwärtige Verständnis der Kulturräume des Roten Meers und des Mittelmeers wird auf eine territoriale Verbundenheit zurückgeführt, die in koloniale Logiken verwickelt ist. In einer Region, die jahrhundertlang Mittlerin zwischen ausgedehnten Handelszonen und -kreisläufen war, hat Migration Vorstellungen von Kultur geprägt. Heute beschwört Migration in diesem Teil der Welt ein davon deutlich unterschiedenes Bild herauf.

Ende 2015 haben die Künstler\_innen Heba Y. Amin (Ägypten) und Dawit L. Petros (Eritrea/Kanada) das Black Athena Collective gegründet. Das Forschungs- und künstlerische Experimentallabor befasst sich mit dem politischen Diskurs und mit Praktiken räumlicher Konstruktion in der Region des Roten Meeres zwischen Eritrea und Ägypten. Das Kollektiv entstand aus dem Bedürfnis heraus, Mobilität als entscheidendes Prinzip zu thematisieren, um neue territoriale Konventionen vorstellbar zu machen und neue Ansätze für Politiken der Staatsbürgerschaft zu entwickeln. Anhand von Bildern aus Archiven und Bibliotheken kolonialer Landvermessung, Geschichten der Kolonialarchitektur sowie Studien nomadischer Architektur in nord- und ostafrikanischen Landschaften untersuchen sie heutige Geografien anhand der Geschichten der Mobilität und entwerfen so alternative konzeptuelle Rahmungen.

Das Black Athena Collective widmet sich damit Herausforderungen, die aus Martin Bernal's Hinterfragung der methodologischen Annahmen der westlichen Geschichtsschreibung hervorgehen. In einer multidisziplinären Perspektive, die Geografie, Archäologie und Geschichte einschließt, befragt das Kollektiv schreibend, in Performance Lectures und mit visuellen Strategien die Geschichten der Region des Roten Meeres und stößt neue historische Dynamiken an.

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Aus dem Englischen von Annika Haas

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It is unclear who burned the library of Alexandria. Various theories attribute it to different perpetrators: Julius Caesar in 48 BC, Theophilus around 400 AD and Caliph Omar in 640 AD. We are told, however, that it was the greatest destruction of the ancient world's archive of knowledge.

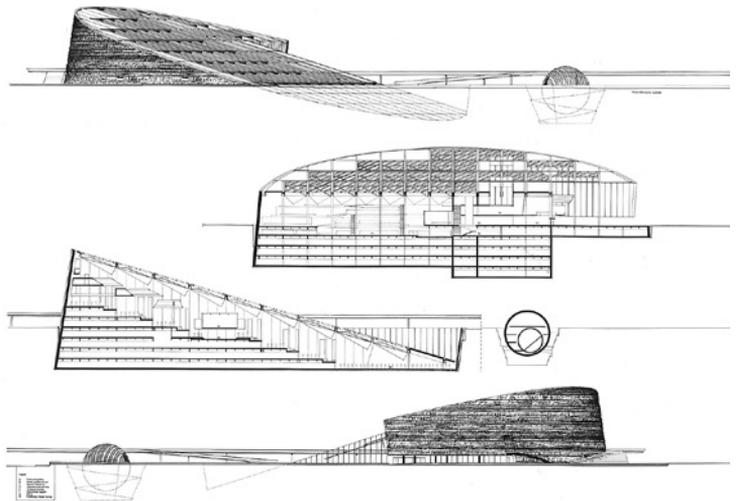
A narration of history privileges the dramatic singular event over the slow, unraveling of time. It obliterates the peripheral, small matters,

the fringes.

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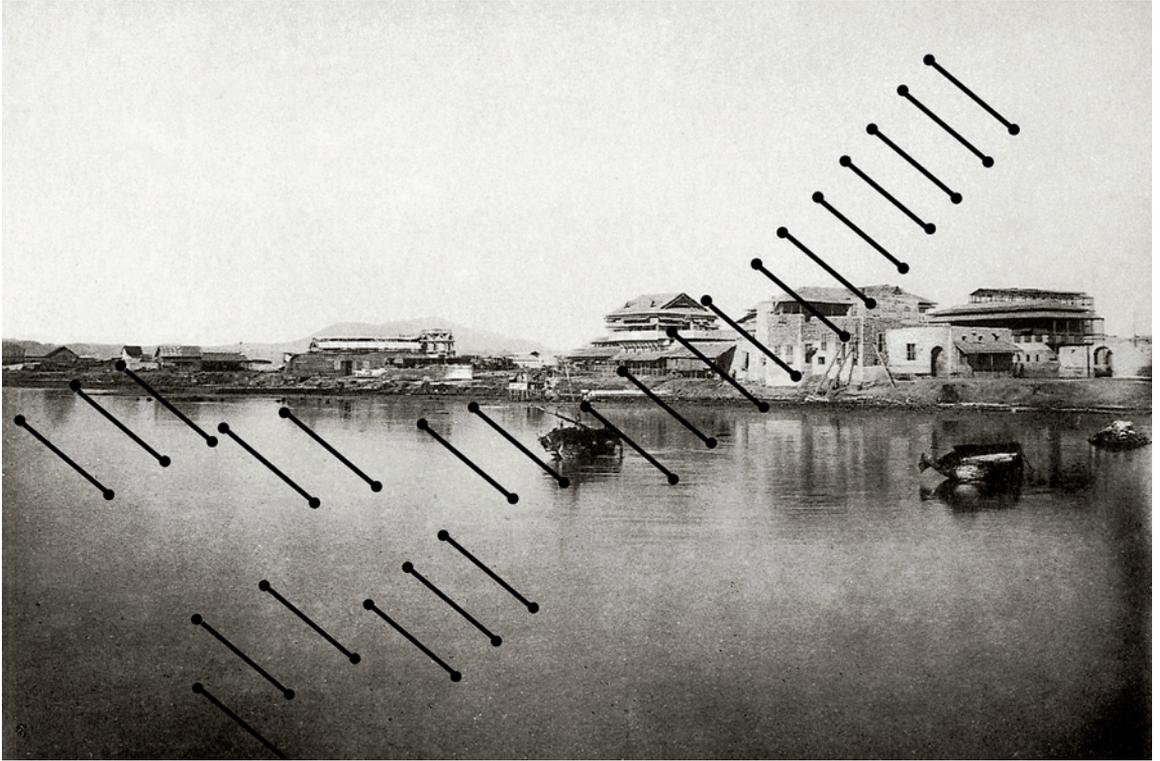
"History is neither the opposite of fiction nor is it simply fictional. History is a method rather than a truth, an institutional formalization of the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives".<sup>1</sup> We consider every act of telling an act of possibility to interrogate the uncertainties of the past while illuminating tensions in the present.

No images of Alexandria's ancient library exist. In its stead, architectural elevations of the new Alexandria Bibliothéque are built in proximity to the historical. The new building connects to a lineage that attempts to resituate the importance of the region in a global context, an endeavour to access the *greatest archive of knowledge*.



Architectural Renderings of Bibliotheca Alexandrina.  
Image courtesy of Snøhetta.

Conceived as a revival of the ancient library, the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina was built and opened to the public in 2002 in close proximity to its historical location.



Archeology of the Image 2, Notation 1, Massawa, 2018

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Not only do we fail in our attempts to account for the knowledge that is lost, we are also unable to make a definitive claim on the mechanism of destruction itself. History is an enterprise through which the space of truth in fiction is recuperable. The construction of the contemporary library without a discernible framework requires an insertion of fantasy, myth.

The crisis within the contemporary moment makes the construction of such a structure necessary. Without a concrete form to substantiate itself, the new Alexandria Bibliotheque is an attempt at restaging history without a mimetic trace, or a representational shadow.

With the donation of 500,000 books from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the current Alexandria Bibliotheque houses the largest repository of French books in Africa - books with their own systems of classification and imposed modes of knowledge.

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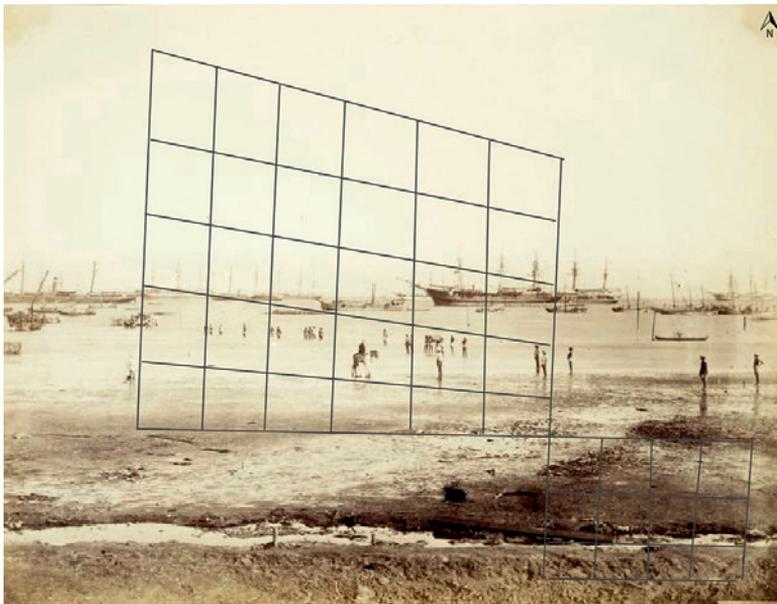
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**Whose trajectory of history do we speak of?**

We move within the boundaries of imagined geographies, in which what is available is not the truth as an absolute historical measure of the world, but a constructed series of representations. The sea, with the narratives of those who move across its waters, is a concept and a historical cultural formation that is imaginatively constructed.

We can allude to the erasure of other stories with certainty. Historical processes are often employed to flatten out knowledge, homogenize thought and limit the scope of diverse information. Connecting to lost knowledge points to the possibilities of engaging multifaceted narratives.



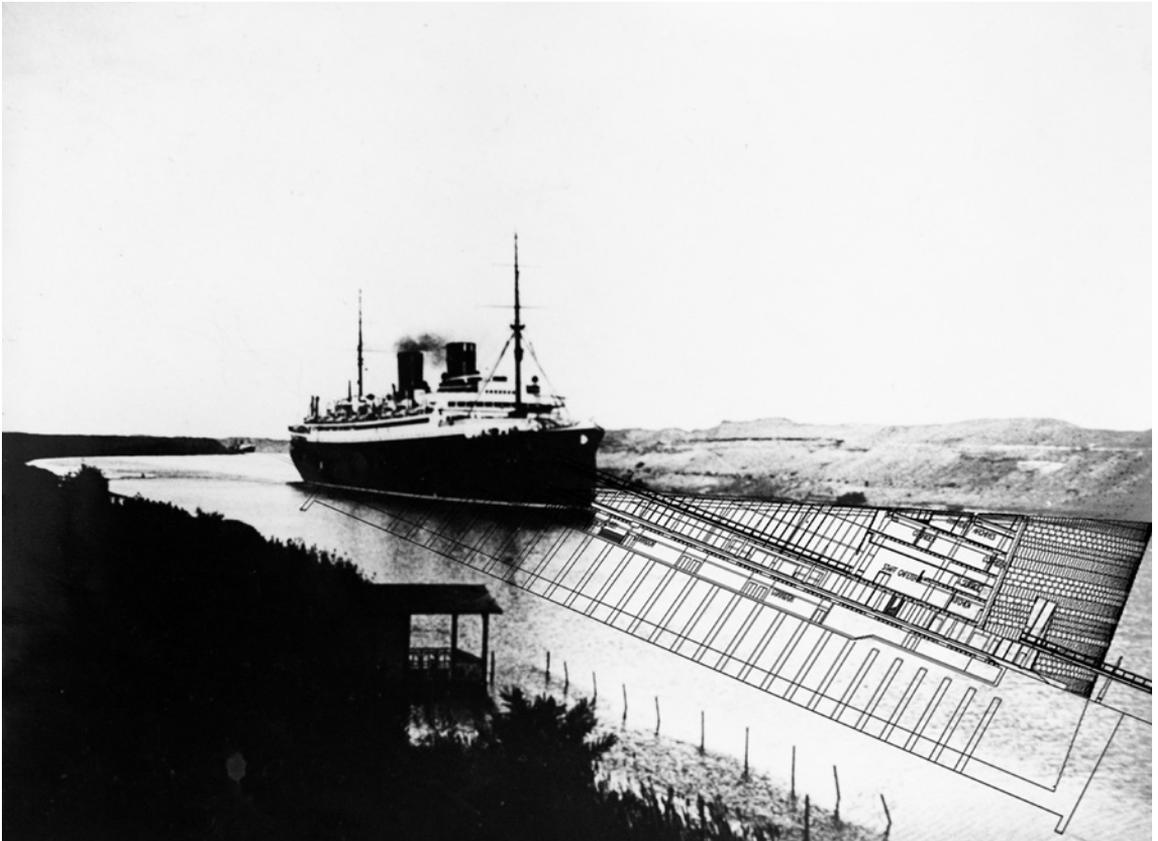
Archeology of the Image 4, Notation 1, The Bay of Zula, 2018

### **From what distance are things clear?**

It is clear that the south to north trade route is a circuit on which knowledge moves.

A legend: Foreign ships arriving to Alexandria had all books and scrolls confiscated. Copies were produced and later returned to their owners, while the originals were kept for the library.

Which inflections of cultural possibilities have been erased when the Alexandria library is framed as a Greek library, the *Grand Church of Universal Knowledge and Scholarship*?



Archeology of the Image 3, Notation 1, Suez Canal, 2019

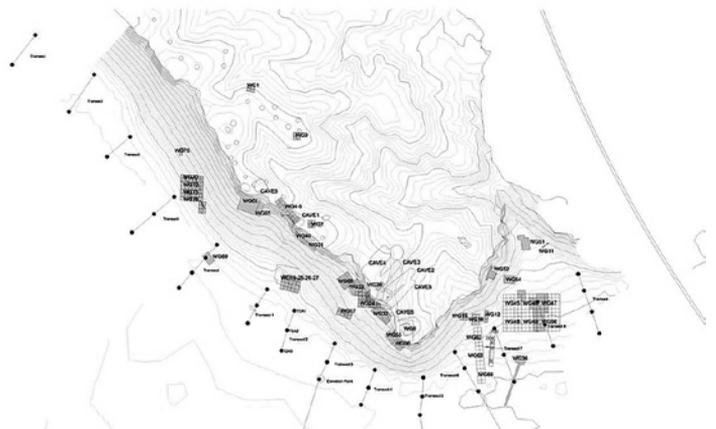
**The future is where the histories of the dispossessed are used to construct narratives with which to imagine other futures.**



Archeology of the Image 1, Notation 1, Massawa, 2017

We tell ourselves simplified stories for easy consumption when we should tell complex ones even though they may bring about a sense of discomfort.

**If history is not negotiable then the future is not negotiable.**



Map of Mersa/Wadi Gawasis with excavated areas.  
 Courtesy of Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt.



Archeology of the Image 5, Notation 1, White Nile, 2018

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