History without Chronology
Tanaka, Stefan

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Newton’s chronological writings might be called the mathematical principles of the consolidation of empires because they dealt primarily with quantities of geographic space in a temporal sequence; the individuals mentioned in his histories, usually royal personages, were merely signposts marking the progressive expansion of territories. . . . The subject matter of his history was the action of organized political land masses upon one another.

—Frank Manuel (1963: 137)

For three centuries maybe the objectification of the past has made of time the unreflected category of a discipline that never ceases to use it as an instrument of classification. In the epistemology that was born with the Enlightenment, the difference between the subject of knowledge and its object is the foundation of what separates the past from the present . . . the “past” is the object from which a mode of production distinguishes itself in order to transform it.

—Michel de Certeau (1986: 216)

The history that showed things “as they really were” was the strongest narcotic of the century.

—Walter Benjamin (1999: 463)
In the introduction, I raised Kuhn’s complaint that history obscures its research process. Kuhn’s comment and Simon’s observation at the end of the previous chapter (that historians focus on the particular) are connected in the merger between absolute time and history. Indeed, they operate together to obscure this historical process and naturalize each other—chronology and history. The combination serves as the basis for our understanding of the world, the overall structure of modern history (system), and the basic methods for historical inquiry (history). The “disguised” element of the historian’s process is in the acceptance of chronological time as an external (i.e., absolute) time, the subsequent elision of this historical transformation, and the turn of history to the archives.

The success of this transformation is in, of course, the hundred plus years of the discipline. It also extends well beyond to historical thinking; Ermarth assesses the place of this historical thinking in the modern world: “Historical time, in fact, may be the most powerful value confirmed by the narratives of Western, especially Anglo-American, culture; it informs much of what we tell ourselves about individual and collective life. This convention underwrites the many touchstones of social, scientific, and economic thought in the West since the seventeenth century” (1992: 20). The power of historical thinking, and history as well, is in the way that it orders and orients us to certain ways of knowing about the past and our world.

This centrality of historical thinking contrasts the current worries in the discipline of history about a decline in interest and attention (and significance?) as well as a rise of a presentist mindset. Historians have generally blamed external factors, especially the denigration of humanistic understanding in favor of science and technology. While there is good reason for such a view, historians have ignored internal issues; we have so naturalized our processes that we have overlooked how history itself is a part of the problem. I agree with Ermarth (1992, 2011), who suggests that the history that developed over the twentieth century no
longer matches changes to our societies conceptually, practically, or scientifically. This statement raises questions whether history too suffers from the fatal confusion Bastian (2012) identified in our understanding of time and nature. A naturalized chronological time is the foundation of this disconnect.

When the chronological structure is decentered, a richer, complex interaction between things before and anticipation becomes apparent. Things that happened often weigh heavily on anticipation as well as decision-making; they are not past and future but operations of evaluation, negotiation, and organization. Moreover, without the distance established by dates, we also begin to see commonalities between ideas, deeds, and sensibilities. For example, work in digital media suggests that communicating digitally bears more similarities with oral rather than written modes (Foley 2012; Saussy 2016). Work using “deep time” shifts subjects and perspectives where issues today might be similar to issues prior to the Enlightenment (Smail 2008, Standage 2013; Zielinski 2006). Augustine’s notion of time might be closer to our lives in the twenty-first century: “It might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things” (1961: 269). This seems to align better with Benjamin’s quest for a history framed by Jetztzeit, an extended present. Benjamin’s Jetztzeit was an attempt to extract humans from chronological time, not our current presentism as an extension of mechanical production. But if indeed we are in a world of an extended present, what does it mean for history and our understanding of the world (see, for example, Gumbrecht 2003; Hartog 2015; Nowotny 1994; Rushkoff 2013; White 2014)?

Certeau suggests that our current practice of history employs “bewitching voices of the narration [that] transform, reorient, and regulate the space of social relations” (1986: 207). The phrase “bewitching voices,” like occlusion, points to a trickery or seduction in history itself, a similar effect to Benjamin’s identification of “as they really are” as the narcotic of the twentieth century. Like
magic, the trick involves distraction so that what is obscured has been hidden in plain sight, invoked frequently as a natural part of history. In this chapter, I argue that that bewitchment is made possible by the conflation of history and chronology. The obfuscation can be seen in manifold situations. For example, it is evident in the idea that developmental policies are applicable to different cultures at the same levels of development, irrespective of local circumstances and cultural differences. Or perhaps it is in the current fascination with algorithms that crunch masses of data, using the past (data) to instantiate and preserve the present in the name of (technological) innovation. This might lead to some kind of change, but often it is similar to the eighteenth-century application of mathematics to insurance (and chance) for profit. And today, we have new periodizations—Big History and the Anthropocene— that attempt to deal with these changes. While both have some promise, they are within or subsumed by absolute time.

From this brief introduction, I hope that it is clear that, by a history of history, I do not intend to write about how major figures—for example, Vico and Michelet—have written narratives and accounts of the past, beginning with Herodotus. These operate in chronological time (even though chronological time did not exist) and reinforce—through a narrative of becoming—the naturalization of our current chronological structure of history. The historical structure that emerged during the eighteenth through twentieth centuries was a new way of conceiving and organizing social relations using the new technologies—linear, mechanical, and absolute time. Michel Foucault writes, “And it is in this classified time, in this squared and spatialized development, that the historians of the nineteenth century were to undertake the creation of a history that could at last be ‘true’—in other words, liberated from Classical rationality, from its ordering and theodicy: a history restored to the irruptive violence of time” (1970: 132). This violence of time is the imposition of a new reality structured by a linear, mechanical chronology. By weaving itself into this time,
history became the mediating system between science and society, a “squared and spatialized development.” It created a world order; it changed the subject, object, data, and understanding of those it described (thereby colonizing them). History became a technology for order and control; it “transform[s], reorient[s], and regulate[s] the space of social relations” away from persons toward categories of people. In short, it changed what had been real to a new reality based on abstract, not experiential principles. It created a “virtual reality.”

**DISCOVERY OF THE PAST**

People had (and have) different relations with and uses of pasts where what had happened is very much still a part of their present. To suggest that what has happened is gone and no longer part of the present is fantasy. One only has to look around, read (or listen to) the news, and think about how our lives are framed to recognize that pasts are constituent parts of our present. There are other ways of keeping previous happenings in the present. One form of recording was the annal, or the chronicle. Hayden White points to the following entries in the Annals of Saint Gall (1987: 6–7; blank years eliminated):

- 710. Hard year and deficient in crops.
- 712. Flood everywhere.
- 714. Pippin, mayor of the palace, died.
- 718. Charles devastated the Saxon with great destruction.

As White points out, this is a list of extreme events that were a threat to “a culture hovering on the brink of dissolution” (1987: 7). Natural calamities and social events are not distinguished. Being, explanation, connections, causality, order of importance, and dates are not given. Yet White sees a thread: “Everywhere it is the
forces of disorder, natural and human, the forces of violence and destruction, that occupy the forefront of attention. The account deals in qualities rather than agents, figuring forth a world in which things happen to people rather than one in which people do things” (1987: 10). The stable condition in nonmodern societies is not change but repetition, the continuation of the past—especially ideals of some exemplary founding figure (like Emperor Jinmu in the *Kojiki*) in the present. Change did exist, but it occurred gradually through recurrence, was a devolution from the ideal beginning, and resulted from efforts to recover that originary state. Gurevich describes the aura of certainty in medieval Europe that existed in the repetitive present: “The past, as it were, returns continuously, and this lends solidity, gravity, a non-transient character to the present” (1985: 143).

Genealogy was another common mode of representing the previous happenings. This is closer to *historia magistra vitae*, exemplary deeds and figures, things, or happenings worth remembering to provide a sense of certainty when confronting a mystical and powerful cosmos. Gabrielle Spiegel points out that these forms often had political purpose—to authorize the present through connection to before—and were organized generationally, not chronologically (1997: 99–110). The subject was usually the individual or family line. These examples suggest that nonmodern societies had a sense of before—a sense of its utility—and anticipation, but that is not the same as our understanding of the present between past and future. Moreover, the goal of the chronicler was transparency; he sought to convey faithfully what he heard or knew, including legend, unverified reports, and fables.

Newton himself shows the difficulty of the transition of history in his lesser cited *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended*. He did try to move history, especially the accounts of ancient kingdoms, into chronology. This is evident in the closeness of Manuel’s description of *Chronology* to our international system, world, or global history. It can be read as ordering all onto one progressive
timeline that quantifies—that is, measures and compares through interaction of now naturalized units—and it shifts the subject toward growth, hegemony, and violence. We can see how absolute time operates as the ahistorical structure for a historical narrative of a world order. But emphasizing the connection to our current system is anachronistic and gets ahead of our story: *Chronology* shows the power of inherited forms of knowledge and that our application of absolute time to human activity was not that of Newton. Newton worked on *Chronology* for forty years, he frequently failed to precisely date events, and he predicted Armageddon in 2060 (Wilcox 1987: 208–14). Nevertheless, he does move history closer to chronology.

*Chronology* uses an analogy that we still employ, the interchangeability between physical mass and human activity as aggregates or categories. Manuel’s description of this work indicates two important changes: first, the subject of a chronological history becomes “quantities of geographic space in a temporal sequence” or “organized political land masses.” It is the shift to place-based units, away from the deeds and thinking of individuals. History uses the demand for classing within universal time described in the previous chapter. Second is the presumption of motion; history describes the interaction, conflict, fusion, or destruction of these places. This is an extension of priority on the movement of mass in Newton’s laws of motion to the expanded world. The relation between stability and change is now inverted.

Our current understanding of history became possible with the differentiation of the past from the present (Certeau 1988: 2; Fasolt 2004: 12–22; and Schiffman 2011). The idea that the past had to be discovered is strange to us today. The key to this discovery was not a before but a past that is both prior and different (Schiffman 2011: 263). According to Zachary Schiffman in his careful study *The Birth of the Past*, Montesquieu was the first to use such a past in his efforts to write a universal history, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). Schiffman writes, “Montesquieu’s writings represent a sea
change in historical thinking . . . he showed how to deploy Cartesian analysis . . . using it to grasp the relations between distinctively human entities. In so doing, he distinguished between these entities by holding them at a remove from each other and measuring the distances between them” (2011: 209). Historians will no doubt disagree whether the emergence of a past can be located with such precision to one person. The eminent medieval historian Jacques Le Goff sees pasts emerging earlier and history evident from the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, it is clear that a new form of historical knowledge emerged with the Enlightenment and since the nineteenth century has developed into the basis of historical thinking today. Montesquieu’s human entities are similar to “quantities of geographical space.” Relations are understood through measurement of temporal distance. Interestingly, Montesquieu’s Spirit is not chronological; his past facilitated comparison of political units and human sensibilities, but he did not do so sequentially (Toulmin and Goodfield 1965: 115–18).9 A universal history did not necessarily mean a history according to chronological time.

Johann Gottfried Herder is another important figure who tried to merge history and absolute time. Like Montesquieu, his History of Man is not structured along a single timeline. Iggers calls Herder’s historical structure “cosmopolitan culture-oriented nationalism” (1968: 30).10 Herder echoes Newton in arguing that there are three primary concepts that serve as the organizing principles of the world of experience: time, space, and force (Norton 1991: 43–44, 141–43). He too accepted absolute time, the centrality of movement, and progress among human communities. Herder writes that reason “is not inborn in him; instead he attained it” (Zammito 2009: 79). But Herder’s idea of history is not the historical structure we have accepted (Nisbet 1980: 270–72; Collingwood 1994: 88–93; Iggers 1968: 34–38). Herder dealt with this desire for a universal understanding of the myriad places of the world by arguing that peoples (races) have different characteristics and their development is conditioned by their internal conditions
and environment. On the one hand, he is trying to recognize the heterogeneity of peoples and of their development (or lack thereof). Yet in hindsight, his *History of Man* elevates the German people, and it would be a rather easy step to organize his history along a single timeline as does Hegel. But he did not take that step, instead criticizing universal history organized chronologically as Eurocentric (Iggers 1968: 35). This brings out one of those “differentials of time” that Benjamin sought. Herder recognized heterogeneity (still with hierarchies) but did not lock them into temporal categories.

Schiffman identifies Voltaire as the first historian to write a chronological narrative using a prior and distant past in his *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*. Georg Wilhelm Hegel, through his *Philosophy of History*, is, like Newton and his *Principia*, the intellectual most acknowledged for this transformation (here, of history). Hegel divided his world history into three successive conditions: the Original state (Oriental world) where repetition prevailed, the Reflective state (Greek and Roman worlds) of increasing self-consciousness, and finally the Philosophical state (Germanic world) where through Reason, one understands the Spirit. This structure of progress was taken to the nascent social sciences when Condorcet and Saint Simon sought to create positivism, which would turn history into a science of becoming. At this point, it is worthwhile to recall the breakup of time, what Serres calls “classe,” as discussed in chapter 1. By the nineteenth century, absolute time also became linear historical time. The subject shifted to knowledge about organized political land masses, and nation-states were ordered according to their condition along a linear structure of development or progress. This brings out one of the central roles of a prior and distant past; the order it provided enabled comparison based on temporal measurement. Koselleck describes this process as the movement from a new time, *neue Zeit*, to modernity, *Neuzeit*. Modernity not only is an era but also “becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right” (Koselleck 1985: 246).
Interestingly, this convergence of chronology and history removes this *Neuzeit* from history; it becomes a system that orders the world. Siskin describes this relation between system and history: “With system now mediating the empirical connection to things—absolving history of that function—this was the moment in which temporality completed its move to history’s core. New knowledge groupings now had empirical content arranged systematically and their own chronological narratives to define them and to differentiate them from each other” (2016: 56). The system that mediated the “empirical connections to things” is this absolute time applied to human society by the above intellectuals. It provides a structure of a whole but enables a turn away to the parts, which still are always emplotted onto the temporal grid. There is a shift from relational conditions to hierarchically structured temporal categories. For example, the Orient shifted from being an other of Greece, as in the work of Herodotus, to Montesquieu’s static antithesis to a dynamic Europe, to the beginning of civilization in Voltaire, and to being the first stage of Hegel’s world history and of Comte’s positivism.

Ranke’s claim to reality, *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (as it actually was), makes sense within this system. The chronological narratives that make up the parts parallel the chronological system. It continues to make sense in comparison with other claims because the structure within which he is operating is still our structure: absolute time. His famous line from his *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations* says, “To history has been given the function of judging the past, of instructing men for the profit of future years. The present attempt does not aspire to such a lofty undertaking. It merely wants to show how, essentially, things happened” (Ranke 1973: 137). Ranke is quite conscious of the transition of history from *historia magistra vitae* to a “scientific” history. Like Bacon’s inversion, Ranke similarly inverts criteria from accounts that keep pasts in the present to knowledge about a past that stabilizes the present. This inversion stabilizes history in two ways. First, chronological
history, in addition to absolute time, becomes an externality, a system. History, like time, becomes a metric for verifying, knowing, measuring, and comparing. It is with this idea that units move on a temporal and spatial grid that objectivity becomes possible.

Second, history maintains boundaries of the various spatial units, what Whitehead calls “simple location.” The combination of this form of classing with history is, in my mind, one manifestation of what Whitehead identifies as the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (1925: 58). Simple location facilitates an emphasis on the idea that “things happened” as akin to matter (“organized land masses”) and motion (their rise and fall). The focus on events in places turns history to the particular and away from the general. This operation is similar to a mapping process that Thomas Gieryn argues maintains the epistemic authority of science. Science, he argues, is not absolute but is defined through a cartography in which it is surrounded by “less believable or useful terrain” (1999: 4). Gieryn uses a “Map of a Great Country,” where Mount Science is in the state of Great Knowledge and that state is between the states of Improvement and Fine Prospect and is near the state of Plenty and Enjoyment. As one goes farther away from Mount Science, on the other side of the Demarcation Mountains, one encounters the Territory of Indulgence and then Gloom, Poor Prospect, and Ruin (Gieryn 1999: 6–12). The map of the world, divided at the International Dateline, overlays onto the temporal division of organized land masses. Asia is to the east, Europe is at center, and the US is to the west; the Orient (primitive) is the East, and the Occident (advanced) is the West. In both cases, what Gieryn calls boundary work fixes relationality. In the case of history, this boundary work is maintained through a gesture of exclusion, the division of the old and new, or past and present. This gesture of exclusion will be described below.

The durability of this historical time suggests that it is (has been) seductive. History shifts from things worth remembering and keeping alive to knowledge that establishes order and prescribes
measurable relations or truth. The problem is not that of objectivity or relativity; that dualism reinforces the basis of simple location. It returns us to Benjamin’s statement in the epigraph that Ranke’s notion of reality is the “strongest narcotic” of the twentieth century. It is an opiate for nation-states, those in power, as well as for the scholars who use it to claim relevance and importance. It has obscured the way that history transforms, reorients, and regulates.

PERFORMATIVITY OF HISTORY

It is important to acknowledge the brilliance of this historical time. First, it was key to the rise of the Enlightenment. Whitehead calls this transformation the “historical revolt”—the rise of historical thinking—simply “the study of the empirical facts of antecedents and consequences” (1925: 39). This notion of a revolt brings out the performative nature of the idea of history that we have taken for granted. It still structures, for better or worse, modern political, economic, and social systems; it has been very seductive. Moreover, this new history has been a key technology in addressing what Merchant, Siskin, Shapin, and others identify as the central concern of the era, the quest for certainty and order. Absolute time provided a structure rooted in science, and history provided a knowledge system to emplot all onto one progressive timeline that quantifies—that is, measures and compares through the interaction—growth, hegemony, and the violence of politico-cultural units. This is a part of the transformation and reorientation of what Certeau refers to as bewitching voices; the historical revolt was a shift to particulars. Each geographic space could write its own narrative within the structure of absolute time. For the nations, it offers the potential to write the “reality” of self and even correct what others think. History calls this inquiry into the development of masses within the structure “change over time” or “continuity and discontinuity.” In these phrases, history occludes its own history. This occlusion is in the removal of time from history as if it is, at the risk of
perpetuating this misuse of Benjamin, “empty”; it is to ignore the politics of time. In the sections below, I will describe several ways that the performativity of history has been obscured.

Occlusion of Chronology

Chronology, of course, does not disappear; it is, though, delimited in ways that both make it obvious and neutral, as if without power to order and control. Even though the chronological structure of history is historical and is the very foundation of modern history, in the turn to the particular, time becomes both pervasive and limited; history is “transformed from within into a rational series of operations and objectified from without into a metric system of chronological units” (Certeau 1986: 216). The process Certeau describes can be attributed to two related moves: the separation of history from the philosophy of history and Ranke’s emphasis on the veracity of documents and the turn to the archives.

A philosophy of history (as separate from history) also emerged with the application of history to absolute time. Voltaire was the first to employ the phrase “philosophy of history” (Collingwood 1994), and Hegel is well known for his *Philosophy of History*. In this phrase, Voltaire and Hegel open the possibility of separating this chronological system from histories within it. It serves as the overall structure of movement, then known as progress—a progression toward the spirit, from the Original to the Reflective and finally to the Philosophical state. We now shun these categories, yet the chronological structure still exists. This is where chronological time is, in Koselleck’s words, “a dynamic and historical force in its own right” (1985: 246). Chronological time simply is; there is no need for inquiry.

Once naturalized, history becomes a discipline that operates within that chronological system. Ranke is commonly cited as the iconic founding figure of modern history, especially the transformation of history to research on the particular, of nations using
documents found in archives. He argued that the document is the best way to know events of the past, and the reconstruction of events from these documents results in an objective, real picture of the past. This is familiar, but Ranke relies on juxtaposition to support this assertion. In his essay “On the Relations of History and Philosophy,” he separates the particular (history) from the abstract (philosophy) in order to argue for the veracity of archival research (Ranke 1973: 29–32, 33–46). An inversion occurs where the particular, though built on a now-hidden chronological system, is the part that leads to an understanding of the general and abstract. Siskin describes the connection of this history to a system with an occulted chronological structure: “This interaction [of parts to the whole] was the engine of Newtonian Enlightenment: the calculus divided wholes into an infinite number of parts, and system connected parts into wholes” (2016: 93). The parts are an acknowledgment of multiplicity, but because the general, the chronological system, is universal, difference is at best unevenness. This reliance on simple location allows for the illusion that history is like a jigsaw puzzle; the accumulations of parts (filling the gaps) leads to the whole (White 1978: 126ff). Ranke did not ignore the general; he identifies philosophy as the spirit or supreme idea of a society (echoes of Hegel; Iggers 1968); it transcends chronological time. But in doing so, he eliminates absolute time from philosophy and confirms that history operates in chronological time. (This is perhaps an early moment in the allergy of modern history to ideas, theory, and philosophy.) Time becomes a passing past-present-future that history operates within; the philosophy of history is timeless—it is about spirit and being. The chronological structure that orders the world is accepted as absolute. The politics of chronology, the way that time transforms, reorients, and regulates is, at best, backgrounded. Charles Hedrick, a historian of ancient Greece, writes, “With the development of an overarching chronographic system . . . history becomes ‘one damn thing after another’” (2006: 50).
Particulars

The turn to the particular coincides with the process of “classing”; it is the combination of Newton’s “organized political land masses” that fuse or destroy with Hegel’s philosophy of history. This combination shifted the subject of history from human activity or quality of being to categories of humans, of the state and motion of those units. This shift from life to units was contested, for example, in the writings and appointment of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling to the University of Berlin (Toews 2004: 1–7). John Toews describes Schelling’s criticism of Hegelian philosophy as “what-ness” (state or category) over “thatness” (quality or life): “Hegelian rationality shaped reality into a world of conceptual forms that defined experience but never penetrated beyond these forms to that prior ground of existence that made the shaping activity possible in the first place, and constantly threatened to break through the veil of concepts and reveal their contingent status” (2004: 5).

This is another place where we can see how Certeau’s bewitching voices “transform, reorient, and regulate.” Toews’s language is important: “rationality shaped reality” and conceptual forms “defined experience.” Now the organization and understanding of life and experience is based on systems and categories, not human activity. History becomes a knowledge system (within chronological time) that values some collective singular, “quantities of geographic space in a temporal sequence” (Manuel 1963: 137). Previous happenings are transformed and reoriented into a past that describes some public, the collective singular.

Interestingly, despite its reliance on an absolute time that always flows regularly, this new history stops time—that is, the processes of life—by spatializing time. Newton’s duration, what is between two points in time, allows for periodization—another spatialized time. We must recognize the work of scholars (like Bergson, Harvey, and Lefebvre) who have criticized this separation of absolute space and absolute time and instead argue that
the two are always interrelated. Bergson unpacks the interconnectedness of time and space: “That time implies succession I do not deny. But that succession is first presented to our consciousness, like the distinction of a ‘before’ and ‘after’ set side by side, is what I cannot admit. . . . If we cut it up into distinct notes, into so many ‘befores’ and ‘afters,’ we are bringing spatial images into it and impregnating the succession with simultaneity: in space, and only in space, is there a clear-cut distinction of parts external to one another” (2002: 260–61). Drawing on Halbwachs, Hartog connects this spatialized time to a history that is an abstraction that, although borrowed, is separated from human activity. He writes, “History, which ‘extracts changes from duration,’ forges ‘an artificial duration having no reality for the groups from which these events are borrowed’” (2015: 122). New units—places, taxonomies, and periods—are formulated by succession in chronological writing. This spatialization of time is the principal way that the classing gains historical form (Gross 1982: 59).

This inversion from quality to state is another moment when history turns to the particular, ensconced within but separated from the chronological system that structures history. It fills in the content for the classings that emerge from absolute time, making these newly formed spatializations appear as natural. Through succession and repetition, history marks temporal or geographic boundaries and provides a semblance of order amid motion. Absolute time, by definition, applies to numerous scales; it is deployed within these units as if it is addressing the “thatness.” But this good faith effort to address quality is reoriented toward topics within that system—nations, identity, race, and class.15 To recall Toews, this is a “world of conceptual forms” that don’t penetrate to “that prior ground.” From the nineteenth century, we see a proliferation of histories of nations. These are regulated by the temporal sequence, the chronological system that orders these units and serves as a metric of their differences, usually as the progress (or lack thereof) of the nation-state.
This turn to the particular—the nation-state—has been intoxicating. For Western nations, it provides a way to confirm their superiority in the world; for non-Western places, history (usually the lack of such) was invoked as evidence of inferiority, but it also became (and still is) a vehicle for critique, correction, and the hope for inclusion into the international order. The twentieth century is strewn with efforts to move beyond the hierarchies and categories of this system as well as to use them to rationalize imperial activities (e.g., Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, what we can call an alternate modernity). A question that will be addressed below is to what extent this future is captive of the past; the past as “prior and different” by definition always validates the West as the new, the future, or of the future as a continuation of some teleological process that can only move forward along a continuum from the past.

Gesture of Exclusion

Perhaps the most devious way that history obscures its performativity is within the linear structure itself. On the one hand, the bewitching operation is in the ordering, the hierarchical metric toward an ideal end. Work on the history of time and of history has tended to focus on the linearity or progressive nature of this time. That is its main ostensible structure. I also followed this path. Yet as I discussed in chapter 1, linear time operates with cyclical processes, and increasingly scholars are again recognizing that this linearity depends on other forms of time and displaces these times in ways that support this linear structure (Michael Young 1988; Sharma 2014; Irani 2019; Koselleck 2018). Certeau calls this operation a “gesture of exclusion” (discussed below), Serres calls it a “dogmatic expulsion,” and Marx calls it “formal subsumption.” These operations demonstrate the way that pasts in the language of succession are transformed, reoriented, and regulated to maintain constantly the superiority of the modern. This is a temporal
form of the boundary work Gieryn uses to describe the maintenance of the authority of science. While there is a structure and ostensible possibility for progress or improvement using Newtonian duration, the boundary between past and present, or old and new, is a relational condition that does not lead to changing relations because the latter is defined by juxtaposition against the former. In the perpetual movement to some new (modern, Occident), an old (tradition, Orient) continually reinforces that new. The gesture reinforces those identified as modern and locks those identified as past into a repetitive condition—always the “not yet” (Chakrabarty 2000: 6–11). To repeat Serres, “it follows that we are always right, for the simple, banal, and naive reason that we are living in the present moment” (1995: 48). This is the success and limitation of the historical revolt—it grounds thinking that is freed from the authority of a past but locks those described as past into a constant condition of incompleteness. Elizabeth Povinelli, drawing from Chakrabarty, visualizes this condition as the “imaginary waiting room of history” (2002: 77).19

This is one of those areas where the performativity of history is disguised (hidden) in the very process that enables it. The past, now naturalized simply as previous moments in chronological time (the “old”), plays a critical role in affirming the “new,” the modern, and the most advanced. Certeau describes this “gesture of exclusion” in his study of mystics in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France. This gesture employs some past or marginalized object as one side of a binary from which a society distinguishes itself (Certeau 1992: 17). Though his discussion focuses on heretics, he is clear that this position of other as past has been employed using many other groupings of marginalized people; he mentions cultural and ethnic minorities, spiritual marginalities, the Indian, the mad, the child, and the non-West (1988: 3; 1992: 18). Peoples now classified as some past facilitate the process of classing, of making nations. They give definition to boundaries that show progress—not as much by internal conditions as by juxtaposition that is focused
on state, not quality. Marx identified this process over a century ago as formal subsumption, a process by which the past is incorporated, used, abstracted, and reassigned, not replaced. Harootunian writes, “Surviving practices from prior modes of production were not ‘remnants,’ as such, but rather appeared as historical temporal forms no longer bound to the moment and context in which they had originated, now acting in a different historical environment serving the pursuit of surplus value” (2015: 11). In this gesture of exclusion, repetition is inverted from a stable condition of societies to a form that stabilizes both linear history itself and the condition of being modern. People of difference are transformed into some characterization of repetition; they are closer to nature, the origin, or primitive. They are regulated through the repetition of the gesture itself. Repetition is in the constant monitoring of historiographical boundaries (pasts), but the operation occurs through the structure rather than the conscious acts of the historian. For example, dating calls for the comparison of things across time; it reinforces the new as juxtaposed to the old. This history is not the particular accounts of individuals but the maintenance of the historical structure that is a temporal hierarchy. For the modern, the “same” is a process by which it is forever “new” and a “historical form” more than a homogeneous (or unified) content. I should emphasize that this position of the excluded is not necessarily meant to be derisive. Kathleen Davis points to the dual character of this position—the revered or respected origin in contrast to a strange/different other (2010: 59).

The two levels of history, as system and as particularity, ensure the perpetuation of that “imaginary waiting room.” As long as chronology remains, this gesture of exclusion is a constituent part of history. Fasolt has complained, “So long as there is history, there must be a Middle Ages,” and he acknowledges the many but ultimately futile “well-intentioned efforts” to extract oneself from this position as a modern other (2004: 228). We can just as easily replace medieval with Asia (Orient) or some other non-Western
Some past other (temporal or geographical) preserves and reinforces the privileged position of the modern in history. A predicament of historians of medieval and early modern Europe and of non-Western places is that the structured categorization of these periods or places is built into historical chronology; they are some version of incompleteness or a primitive form of the modern (Spiegel 1997; Gurevich 1985; Fasolt 2004; Cole and Smith 2010; Chatterjee 1986; Chakrabarty 2000; Harootunian 2007). The boundary work constantly performed by the past is hidden in the argument for linear movement and ensures the stability of the system itself.

Tombs of Data

Up to this point, I have argued that the performativity of history is in its chronological system. I have discussed the connection to the change of subject, a transformation of “reality,” and the inversion of repetition that accompanies and maintains the linear structure of history. A reason for the longevity of this system is its scalability. As Siskin (2016) points out, the relation between whole and parts or between system and history also operates within each part—the nation-state to the human. Now, I turn to a smaller fundamental unit of history, the document and the “fact,” where performativity reaches the research practices, the ongoing filtering system of historians. It is perhaps the activity where the “violence of time” is most obscured. Certeau describes the violence of this act as a form of pacification: “This project aims at ‘understanding’ and, through ‘meaning,’ at hiding the alterity of this foreigner; or, in what amounts to the same thing, it aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them scriptural tombs” (1988: 2). The focus on document as the basic unit of historical evidence is a form of control, “scriptural tombs” (or archives), both to limit the multiple possibilities within a document and to constrict recorded happenings to only particular parts of the past.
To a large extent, I have told a story of becoming, the merger of chronology and history. This connection, however, was not obvious. It took almost a century to merge chronology and history into the history we practice today (Wilcox 1987: 187–220). For example, despite his contribution that brings chronology closer to absolute time, history for Petavius was still an account of human activity—acts, thoughts, meaning, and arguments—in which time is internal. He writes, “History has as its own to possess fully the matter of deeds and to write down their order, usually with proofs, arguments, and witnesses, whence the order of individual years is established. Chronology indeed inquires after one thing, by what signs and marks each thing may be arranged in its years and times” (quoted in Wilcox 1987: 205). The difference between the systems he was trying to merge can be illustrated through Herodotus. Herodotus synchronized the chronologies of Athens and Persia around the invasion of Athens as follows: “Kalliades was the archon in Athens in the sixth year after the death of Darius, when Xerxes went to Greece” (Momigliano 1990: 38). We know this year is 480 BC.

The contrast between the locally specific information of the former against the abstractness of a year is stark. The translation of event markers into years transforms understanding. Dates were not noteworthy in many societies. For example, even though 776 BC is the commonly accepted date of the first Olympic Games, that year was not recorded (historians disagree about the year they actually began), and instead, the games themselves marked time. It is the same for the birth of Christ; it was not on December 25, and we now know that the calculation of years is probably four years off (Dionysus Exiguus is the source of the error). These different sensibilities are also evident in the founding of the Hattori Watch Company (Seiko)—an icon for what became the temporal precision of Japan—it varies. In the US, the celebration of birthdays on the date of birth began in the late nineteenth century, a custom that emerged from Hallmark Cards’ search for a new market (Chudacoff 1989).
These are examples of the ways that dating has given meaning to past events through modern criteria, not through the contemporary sensibilities. Petavius did create three rules for the application of dates to history so that they could be ordered according to a single time. First, he identified a date based on authority (corroborating evidence based on reliable accounts). Second, he abstracted the date based on demonstration (astronomical evidence). Third, he used hypothesis (convention; Wilcox 1987: 206–7). The first two rules are close to our current practice, but in the inclusion of convention, Petavius was still allowing traces of the past, especially of exemplary figures and deeds where meaning was situated within a range of interactions.

This turn to documents or “facts” is generally attributed to Ranke, beginning with his research on Venice in the 1830s. Ranke argued that documents (primarily of diplomats and civil servants) offered the material closest to the past and an objective view (Eskildsen 2008). Historians have shown that Ranke’s faith in the veracity of documents was optimistic, but I am less concerned with objectivity than the transformation of accounts into data.23 Like Petavius and historians before him, Ranke sought to determine which information to use. Wolfgang Ernst calls this transformation of material into facts a process of desemiosis (2002). Nowotny’s description of the scientific method as cleansing is apt; it is a process of identifying, naming, classifying, and discarding.24 Ranke compared documents to other sources and especially used names and dates for corroboration and veracity. He “pointed to disagreements and inconsistencies among texts to determine their historical value” (Eskildsen 2008: 436). In Meiji Japan, Kume Kunitake and Shigeno Yasutsugu used similar methods to cull through texts in their project to collect documents, archive them, and write a history of Japan. Cleansing occurred; errors in dates, even though chronological time might not have been a critical marking mechanism, and even misspelling of names were enough to disqualify the authenticity of some documents.
This methodology altered the import of written traces that had served as authoritative sources for knowledge about earlier events. Those that could not measure up to these new criteria have become quaint or primitive stories—important because of their originary status, yet denigrated as historical evidence (these become national literature).25

This brings out the “return” of chronological time, or what Ernst calls a process of resemiosis. Dating facilitates the shifting of pasts from something living in people—meaning and values—to a dead past—empirically verified facts. Now chronological time enables a precise mapping of events and data, independent of individuals, place, or the matrix of relations from which they emerged. This is a part of that virtual reality, “mathematic principles of the consolidation of empires”—again, “simple location.” The place of their creation is replaced by a classing system, often the nation and its institutions. As Certeau points out, the “real” as represented by historiography does not correspond to the “real” that determines its production. In this case, dates organized chronologically are applied to order the particulars of history, the subunits—mass, classing, geographical space, or especially the nation-state. But it is important to heed Harold Innis’s work that shows the bias of media in societies and civilizations (1951). Documents are biased toward a few leaders, institutions, and fixity. This focus contracts pasts into a reduced realm that is acceptable for historical inquiry. Historical data are shorn of a vast array of evidence about pasts. Stories give way to information; they are further fragmented into “facts” disembodied from their place of former significance (Benjamin 1968a). Data become portable; they become a commodity. What historians call context is not the situatedness but the specific time and location of events. This move further separates what becomes this chronological system (world progress) from history (the writing of the becoming of a people—particular). More important, it provides a way to give the Newtonian “mass” a simulacra of qualitative change.
The qualitative element of that history is limited. Ranke (and historians) argued that the particular fits in the general but without interrogating this general. Indeed, history today has a hard time integrating the domestic with the international even though both reinforce each other. Efforts to move beyond this limitation have tried to move away from the national yet do this through the national—during my career, we have tried new nominal forms for (but never replaced) international such as area studies, postnational, multinational, transnational, and global. While I still have hope for the global, nation-states still serve as the principal units of analysis, and the structure of West and the rest prevails. More important, the chronological metric orients history toward technological development and the political and economic deeds of the nation-state; emphasis is on quantitative measurement and comparison.

This history was a part of a larger pattern of “science,” which formulates knowledge systems that order the world. Carolus Linnaeus ordered living organisms into genus and species. Anthropology emerged at the end of the nineteenth century to know those outside the West (see, for example, Fabian 1983; Pratt 1992; Raj 2007; and Richards 1993). Statistics, which began in the previous century, was accepted into the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1833. In each case, data became important as a way to mark its place in some category beyond its immediate environment or the moment of creation.

The identification and collection of documents, the extraction of data from stories, is coterminous with the rise of national archives. There is a clear connection of the rise of the modern archives to the nation-state. The Archives nationales was founded following the French Revolution, and the British Public Records Office was founded in 1838. Ranke increased attention to archives after 1830 when he was disturbed by the revolutionary activity surrounding him. When he began, documents were scattered; research was more akin to field work. The organization of documents into
official archives gives this new reality—a “virtual reality”—material structure: pieces of paper—records—organized according state categories and to scientific standards—chronology. The key organizing principles (*respect des fonds*, or provenance) support this change in subject away from humans toward institutions (Eastwood 2010). Ranke’s turn to the archive brought his history and affinity for the state closer to the goals of the state.

It strikes me that this structure and institutionalization is another fatal confusion in which history has become overly focused on itself. There is a rising interest in the past but a decline in interest in academic history (de Groot 2009). History has ceded a huge swath of the past—human sensibilities and beliefs for this appeal to documents. This focus has also restricted the range of the past—artifacts and ruins are the domain of archaeology (Holtorf 1996), paleography covers humans prior to settlement (Smail 2008), and literature focuses on human sensibilities and emotions. Environment, inherited structures, received knowledge, belief, and experience all affect reception, interpretation, and meaning.

It is important to reconsider our notion of the document and the “fact.” The work of intellectuals prior to and during the Enlightenment bears suggestive commonalities with recent arguments by scientists and the work of psychologists and cognitive scientists that demonstrate the specificity of the event as interconnected. They suggest that our current thinking might be the anomaly, not the norm. I will discuss these sciences in the following chapters. I will remain suggestive, invoking a philosopher and a historian: Whitehead’s “interconnectedness of things” and Certeau’s notion of a text or document as a “theatre organized by the vocabulary and syntax of a moment of history” (Certeau 2015: 22). For these scholars, sources or “facts,” are not objects that exist, isolated from the milieu of their becoming; they have undergone a “cleansing.” Instead, when documents are considered as nodes of activity, they occur among different actors with varying inscriptions and differing forms. The “fact” is not always the same. The
understanding during the moment of eruption, the language of bodies, the places of writing, and of course, the moment of interaction possibly alter its meaning.

Second-order cybernetics is especially relevant here for recognizing the roles of inherited knowledge and the observer. We must also be aware that the document is also information that embeds historical knowledge and that actors use to make their decisions. Multiple perspectives exist; the observer observes, records, and participates; this process is repeated by historians. As information, the document too has a history and has been received differentially. This understanding of a document as a node corresponds to struggles to understand the significance of the past in the sixteenth century (Grafton 1994). Historians might counter that we do this through context. But again, there is an inversion. Context reinserts surroundings after documents are extracted from their situatedness. In the following chapters, I argue that historians must return (or move toward) this notion of the situatedness of data and of information. It is increasingly important in today’s societies that are forsaking pasts for the present.

HISTORY AS MYTH

The institutionalization of this understanding of history occurred at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Interestingly, this is almost simultaneous to the relegation of absolute time to classical time. The chronological structure of history, the basis of what we call historical thinking, is at best one form of time that remains, primarily because of its deep legacy. Yet we persist on using it as if it were absolute. Efforts throughout the twentieth century to suggest other temporal structures have not had much success. Perhaps today is different; this is also the period when communication and knowing are shifting from print to digital, the second period of information inflation. We are only now beginning to deal with this transformation.
In the introduction, I invoked Serres, Blumenberg, and Mali to suggest that the acceptance of the merger of chronology and history maintains this mythical mode (our current system). It is a conceptual system that is linear and regular, homogenizes life according to mechanical, linear processes, and encompasses variation as unevenness (with an enticement that one can become equal). In its merger with history, chronological time has become a social technology that guides and controls us (Mumford 1964). It imposes structure, an ordered mechanical life; it values measurables, especially technology and economics; it relegates humanistic work—ideas, culture, interpretation, and ethics—to a secondary or lesser value compared to measured work; and it guiles us into thinking that we are better than before.

We must admit, though, that this myth is seductive. The seduction of this history is in a hidden boundary marking and maintenance system that enables us to identify the problems of others and thereby create for ourselves a progressive position, which amounts to what Fasolt calls “well-intentioned efforts” (2004: 228). The gesture of exclusion operates among historians and within historical thinking—because we are more recent, we know more than “them.” Those of the past give us certitude that we are more advanced, that we are correct; because they are before or behind, they are marginal and not yet informed—or worse, we will “help them.” Perhaps that is why Benjamin identifies “as they really were” as the strongest narcotic of the twentieth century. History is a core discipline of the social sciences and humanities; it ostensibly explains and constitutes our political and economic systems; it orders the globe; and it confirms our professional identities—“as a historian.”

That certitude, however, depends on the occultation of the performativity of chronological time that takes a relational condition and elides that relationality by assigning temporal positions within a system believed to be natural. Ranke has bequeathed us a history that, in the name of objectivity, allows for the transformation of
cultural difference and conflict “into conditions for a progressive political and ethical struggle for unity and reconciliation” (Toews 2004: 373). That has not worked; the globe is too heterogeneous to formulate a unified order, especially one that is hierarchical. We must explore other ways to think about the significance of pasts in our present. There are hints in the past (prior to the Enlightenment); there are new understandings in the sciences that we must consider. I would argue that it is even more important in our digital age than ever.