Governance Archaeology:
Research as Ancestry

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This essay presents the idea of governance archaeology, an approach to learning from the past to inform the politics of the future. By reporting on a prototype historical database, we outline a strategy for co-producing a global commons of collective governance practices that can inspire institutional learning and experimentation, particularly in the face of rapid technological change and vexing global crises. Embedded in our approach is an orientation of ancestry whereby practitioners cultivate relationships of accountability and responsibility to the legacies they learn from, recognizing the harm from past patterns of exploitation. By taking seriously a wide range of historical governance practices, particularly those outside the Western canon, governance archaeology seeks to expand the options available for the design of more moral political economies.

During the period in Europe that continues to be called *the* Enlightenment – as if there could be no other – a certain class of thinkers and politicians had the opportunity to significantly remake fundamental arrangements of the social order. How they did it may seem shockingly conservative to today's political innovators: they looked to the past. They used texts such as those in Thomas Jefferson's beloved library, so full of political antiquities, to make arguments about what had happened many centuries earlier in the heydays of Athens and Rome. Less explicitly, they cribbed lessons from the peoples that their colonial projects brutalized and sought to erase. Benjamin Franklin invoked the "Ignorant Savages" of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy to embarrass his fellow colonists into organizing at least as well against British rule.[1]

The embers of that Enlightenment have dimmed over the intervening centuries, but another opportunity for remaking the social order may be at hand. The eighteenth-century regime of electoral republicanism within nation-states, later rebranded as "democracy," appears to be threatened around the world, and an unappealing cadre of authoritarians has lined up to take its place.[2] The decades-long ascent of transnational corporations now jockeys with the disruptions of world-spanning digital networks that have reprogrammed information flows, then political fortunes, and increasingly the basic units of social and economic

life. The means of coordinating to address urgent challenges like climate change and pandemics seem persistently out of reach. Aspirations toward a new moral political economy – resilient enough to survive against the alternatives – will succeed or fail depending on whether we can find suitable means of governing it.

It is enticing to think of the future as a truly undiscovered country, radically transformed by the inevitable technological wonders to come, but the past retains its grasp on what we allow ourselves to imagine. Silicon Valley luminaries revel in the vernacular "big history" books of Yuval Noah Harari, while David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* offers a counterhistory of human institutions based less on reigning technologies than on devious, diverse ingenuity.[3] These works' popularity reflect a struggle over which versions of the past will situate the options available to the future.

Where will people today turn for inspiration and justification as they concoct political arrangements for the centuries to come? The dominant political repertoire in many parts of the world has been defined either by or against Western democratic capitalism. This regime achieved a degree of wealth and stability, and its beneficiaries heralded it as the sole path by which societies might flourish. Yet, as capitalist democracies increasingly appear crippled by pressing crises, the limitations in that tiny sliver of the overall human experience with self-governance are becoming ever more evident.

To expand our historical imagination and our repertoires for the future, we propose what we call *governance archaeology*: a strategy for co-producing a global commons of collective governance practices that can inspire institutional learning and experimentation, particularly in the face of rapid technological change and vexing global crises.

It is necessary to take seriously the governance practices of older and past societies – especially non-Western ones – for empirical and moral reasons. As we learn more about the diversity of political arrangements around the world and through history, the usual West-centered view seems increasingly myopic. To create a more equitable and inclusive world, we need to design for a "pluriverse," a world in which many social worlds can fit.[4] This task, however, is fraught with difficulties.

As Franklin's appropriation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy demonstrates, adapting the politics of others is no neutral activity. It comes with perils of co-optation, even cultural genocide. Governance archaeology needs to include the practice of *ancestry*, an ethic of relationship and codesign across many times and places, to cultivate what John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi call "an expanded community of fate."[5] In governance archaeology, historical cases are not merely inert objects ripe for extraction. They are living artifacts, crafted by human practitioners who deserve the respect of being political ancestors. The governance archaeologist seeks to become a worthy descendant.

Governance archaeology is not an attempt to draw universalizing conclusions from a body of necessarily limited historical sources, or to derive a set of idealized institutional forms to implement today.[6] Instead, it aspires to expand the range of what is available in varied governance contexts by providing examples that go beyond today's dominant forms of representative democracy and their canonical early modern European and North American antecedents. Ultimately, it is up to communities of practice to evaluate which patterns and examples are useful for them to learn from. We believe that making a more moral political economy will depend in part on people across many contexts and networks, finding better ways to ensure just distributions of economic and political power. Our method seeks to serve that multiplicity.

In what follows, we share our preliminary experience with governance archaeology, which centers around developing a database of global, historical governance designs. We offer observations about how the data set can be used to move beyond conventional political categories. But the work of data collection has not occurred in academic isolation. The database emerged through our participation in efforts to develop software for facilitating the governance of online communities as part of the Metagovernance Project.[7] We also organized a six-month artist residency, *Excavations: Governance Archaeology for the Future of the Internet*, that culminated in an exhibition at the United Nations Internet Governance Forum.[8] Through these engagements, we have attempted to cultivate the ethic of relationship and codesign that we apply to the historical evidence. We offer what we have learned so far as a contribution to the task of discovering designs for the equitable, accountable institutions that are so urgently needed.

Our database catalogs examples, throughout human history and geography, of what we refer to as *collective governance*. Collective governance includes practices of power-sharing, participatory decision-making, and community-based rule enforcement among stakeholders. These are the rudiments for the kinds of accountable, democratic societies that can support moral political economies. We opt for this capacious framing to expand the scope of options far beyond the now-dominant model of representation by professional politicians or technocrats, legitimated by the sporadic participation of a broader subset of the governed.

The database is very much a work in progress. We began collecting data in the summer of 2021, and we have so far coded over one hundred discrete communities, about four hundred and fifty institutions, one hundred institutional mechanisms, and thirty cultural values. Table 1 provides some definitions and a snapshot of the database's main structure.[9] We intend the temporal and spatial range of the database to cover, potentially, the whole world from prehistory to today, although we have so far focused on a sample.

Table 1
Glossary of Terms for the Collective Governance Database

Communities	Units of governance and shared culture
Institutions	Specific institutional structures within a given community
Mechanisms	Within institutions, patterns of governance practice (for example, jury, council, voting)
Culture	Within communities, patterns of shared values and norms (for example, solidarity, ritual, supernatural belief)
Time	Situates the community in history
Place	Situates the community geographically
Size	Approximate number of members in the community at the specified time and place

Source : Basic fields in the authors' database. The database, developed in Airtable, can be viewed from the perspective of any of the fields on the left, displaying the relationships with all other fields.

Collective governance does not have to characterize whole societies for them to be included. Rather, we seek to unearth spaces of collective governance wherever and however they have historically appeared, no matter the scale or the level of jurisdiction. We also include forms of collective governance even when they are embedded in more hierarchical systems. The database thus considers decision-making and norm-enforcement mechanisms governing hunter-gatherer bands, as well as councils within empires. Our emphasis on hybridity challenges typologies of governance that have prevailed at least since the ancient Greeks : for example, the common tripartite scheme of democracy, oligarchy, and monarchy. This has empirical and theoretical benefits. Actual examples of collective governance are often intermingled with other kinds of structures, so finding them requires attention to such complexity. The intermingling of diverse institutions also raises instructive questions about how institutions for collective governance have coexisted with other institutions.

Compiling the database has led us to several early observations. The first, simply, is the sheer profusion of meaningful forms that collective governance has taken across human experience at various scales, and for many different purposes. Communities have used collective governance to check powerful kings, to govern localities, to distribute goods and services, and to define access to resources. In the Kuba Kingdom of Central Africa, collective governance developed only at the vil-

lage level. Beyond the unit of the village, nobles and kings were in charge. Meanwhile, the Italian maritime republics were able to check elite rule with the rise of council and assembly governance. In Gold Rush California, with the colonial government a continent away, miners collectively defined and enforced the rules that regulated access to their claims.

Further, while familiar typologies expect either strictly representative or participatory forms of collective governance to emerge based on the size of the community, we observe that collective governance can develop at many scales. It is in some sense always delegative, meaning that the participants in governance are a subset of the entire community. Sometimes that subset is broad, as when popular assemblies represent a polity, and sometimes it is narrow, as in most occurrences of council governance. Yet larger assemblies appear almost as often as smaller councils in our provisional data set. Sometimes delegation is representative, in that specific rules ensure that smaller and larger organizational bodies resemble each other. But sometimes representation simply means that a subset of the community is in charge. The subset may not reflect the composition nor the evolution of the larger community over time. Different rules governing representation may exist within the same community. For example, the Athenian assembly in the fifth and fourth century BCE operated on a first-come, first-served basis, and membership changed in each assembly (of which there were roughly forty per year). During the same period, the courts of law featured complex mechanisms aimed at crafting each jury panel as a microcosm of the whole eligible citizenry.

Finally, our data so far reveal enormous diversity – not just in the structure of communities or in the types of institutions, but also in institutional mechanisms. Similar mechanisms do recur, most notably the basic structures of assemblies, councils, and voting. But apparent similarities accompany enormous variation in the combinations of rules within an institution and in its linkages with the institutional network to which it belongs. For example, among the Tshiluba speakers of Kasai in Central Africa, a council of peers elected a chief (an extremely common governance mechanism), but the mandate was short and the elected chief "was expected to pay his peers a substantial sum" in exchange for his position.[10] By contrast, among the Wyandot (Huron) people of North America, clan members elected chiefs whose position was hereditary, but whose power was checked by other clan chiefs within the same village, as well as elders and others in the community through a village council.

These observations call into question widespread assumptions embedded in theories of governance: namely, the notions that large-scale and supposedly intrinsic aspects of human behavior – like self-interest, ignorance, or apathy – are fundamental obstacles to participatory and collective self-governance.[11] Such assumptions have long served to justify and legitimize autocracy, technocracy, and epistocracy. Our research so far suggests instead that meaningful forms of collec-

tive governance can emerge within complex representative and hierarchical institutional networks in many places, in many shapes, and at many scales.

The more cases we add to the database, the more pathways we see for building collective governance practices at the heart of a new moral political economy. At the same time, the database reveals the fallacy of conflating collective governance with good governance, a common misconception often associated with anarchist and libertarian scholarship, of which Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* is but the latest instance. The emergence of collective governance, in the past as today, has often masked practices of subordination, outright subjection, and manipulation. The most obvious example is the disconnect between local self-governance and governance at the level of a larger governing unit (such as a confederacy, a state, or an empire), which could lead to significant imbalances of power. More generally, it is often very difficult to assess the real functions of structures like popular assemblies and elections, let alone the meaning of consent. Given the nature of the evidence, it would be ahistorical to assume function and purpose based on the label later ascribed to a practice. A database simply cannot substitute for detailed exploration of particular cases and, ultimately, accountability to whatever can be learned about the people who enacted them. Yet what we lose in terms of depth and understanding, we gain in terms of breadth and comparison of diverse structures.

The concerns do not end here. As we build and review the rows and columns of the database, we face the challenges inherent in the process of cataloging the experience of distant communities whose lives and fortunes were often violently elided. We are acutely aware of the danger of hypocrisy : our project risks grounding its claim of building a moral political economy on an act of epistemic appropriation, not so different from that of the "Founding Fathers" of the United States. Similarly, the material archaeology of dirt, artifacts, and monuments has most often proceeded through the extension of colonial might. Only more recently have archaeologists begun organizing their work with the intention of dismantling colonial relations.[12] In that spirit, we develop an orientation of ancestry, which is aimed at cultivating relationships of accountability and responsibility to the legacies we learn from.

Ancestry is not a model or a formula. It is a response to an encounter. It is not a claim of equivalence to ancestry by blood or adoption : the encounter forges its own kind of ties. Ancestry – becoming and being descendants – involves learning to acknowledge, respect, critique, and make accessible a wider range of human political experience as a means of challenging present structures of domination. In practice, this depends on context : it might require accountability to the living inheritors of a source tradition, or embracing a certain practice so as to resist its earlier suppression by colonizers. Reparations may be

owed. Where possible, that accountability should come with clear, even binding commitments.[13] It will surely mean consciously rejecting parts of the same legacies we learn from.

While developing the database, we organized an artist residency on governance archaeology to explore the possibilities and limits of our approach, as well as to ground the interaction between the research itself and today's governance crises. The artists repeatedly reminded us to consider our archaeology not merely as data collection but as an exercise in relationship. We owe the orientation of ancestry to their example.

Our discussion of the contested relationship between early U.S. institutions and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy that preceded them came from a story referred to by one of the residents, Amelia Winger-Bearskin, who is herself Haudenosaunee of the Seneca-Cayuga Nation of Oklahoma, Deer Clan.[14] She pointed out how colonial institutions mimicked colonized ones sporadically and violently, adapting confederalism but stripping away, for instance, the matrilineal power flows in the Haudenosaunee order.[15] The new United States was organized not to build upon but to conquer the earlier order on the same land. As settler wagon trains kept rolling into already inhabited lands, some White U.S. settlers experienced the imagined voices of deceased Native people in Spiritualist séances.[16] We do not aspire to the limited moral reckoning and melancholic backward glance of the séance encounter. Governance archaeology, rather, seeks to challenge present hegemony through encounters with ancestral political practices outside the canonical narratives and taxonomies.

Our residents' engagement with such ancestral practices ranged far and wide. Works that appear in our online exhibition, *Excavations: Governance Archaeology for the Future of the Internet*, are tagged with mechanisms from the database (see Figure 1).[17] Winger-Bearskin proposes a chat bot that expands on aspirations of reclaiming Indigenous land to "Honor Native Sky," recognizing the sky, also, as a space of Indigeneity and colonization, and, increasingly, the basis of network infrastructure.[18] In *Public Audio*, Mateus Guzzo revives the spirit of deposed Chilean president Salvador Allende's vision of a socialist computer system, CyberSyn, to imagine a "hypothetical simulation model of the Brazilian public sphere" against the authoritarian-enabling infosphere now dominated by Meta-owned platforms.[19] Şerife Wong and Eryk Salvaggio envision a "Situationist Blockchain," introducing the ideas of pre-internet French radicals into a design of self-negating cryptographic systems that would constitute "an endless parody of economics."[20] Through encounters with distant and not-so-distant predecessors, these artists revive aspirations that were violently truncated, making present once again the repressed in the service of renewed resistance.

The orientation of ancestry encapsulates three related aspirations: to better acknowledge marginalized cultures for their expertise with collective governance,

Figure 1
Homepage for the Excavations Artists' Residency Website
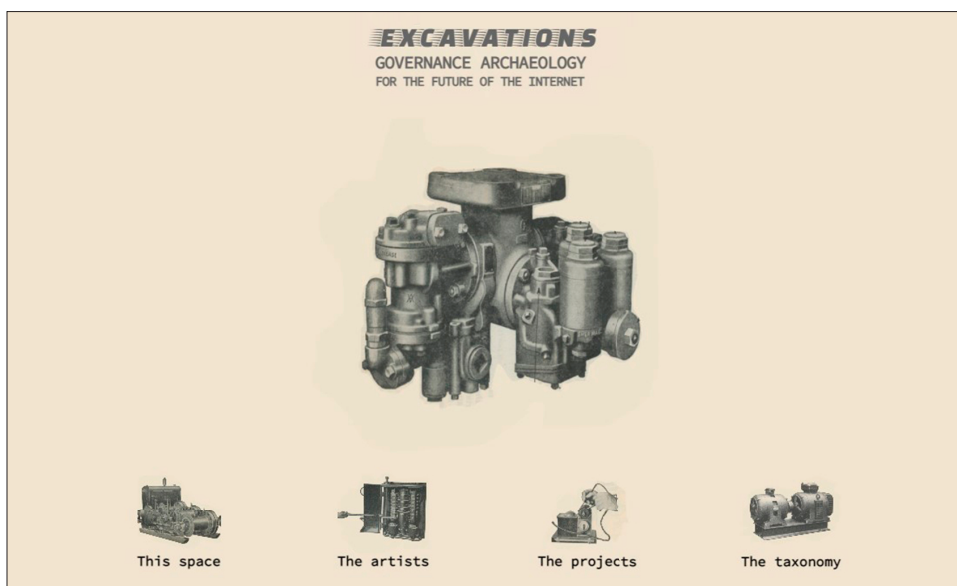
Source : *Excavations : Governance Archaeology for the Future of the Internet* homepage at https ://excavations.digital.

to establish forms of relationality with the communities we study, and to decenter the dominant assumptions of the present (or the very recent past) as the only horizons for the design of future political systems. Relatedly, ancestry aids governance archaeologists in looking beyond abstract mechanisms and structures to the norms and culture that bring political systems to life. When we understand our research as a relationship with real people, past and present, it becomes harder to ignore how culture and norms are essential for the functioning of institutions.

Integrating a sense of ancestry equips governance archaeology to unsettle and dismantle the colonial narratives that present a linear, ascending sequence from the primitive to the modern. As sociologist and legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos insists, a radical "ecology of knowledges" requires that the dominant epistemology be decentered as the canonical point of reference so that "the kind of knowledge that guarantees more participation to the social groups involved in the conception, execution, control, and fruition of the intervention must be privileged."[21] Recognizing that familiar narratives were always profoundly incom-

plete is like discovering a matrilineal line suppressed by patriarchal last names and storytelling. Being a descendant means being indebted. In work like creating art or crafting political institutions, that involves recognizing ancestors as active participants while decentering the loud but incomplete narratives that have obscured them.

Ancestry implies that knowledge arises through relationship, not abstraction. This means, wherever possible, that governance archaeologists should enter into reciprocal relations with living culture-holders of legacies they seek to learn with, reversing asymmetries and acknowledging lineages. Learning from a particular lineage must not be premised on a fleeting and extractive point of contact, but on an ongoing process that is open to unexpected challenges and emergent insights. As sociologist Ronaldo Vázquez writes in a summary of decolonial practice, "The role of the ancestors is not a passive or a conservative one, but rather an active source of meaning."[22]

The forms that relationality will take in our research remain an open question for us. Many of the communities that populate the database so far belong to the distant past, and while we might ask permission to learn from them, we cannot expect a response. In other cases, however, there are living practitioners who should have the right to participate in and cogovern the data of their ancestors. Practitioners from far-flung traditions might find new commonalities through what a database like ours reveals, and form relationships on the basis of those similarities. A governance archaeology database will in some sense have to become not just a collection of information but a network of relationships.

More than any static model or eternal truth, we hope to find a living past: in the words of sociolinguist Catherine Walsh, "a past capable of renovating the future."[23] Governance archaeology is an insistence that past struggles for a moral politics and economy can find new life in our study and our practice.

Even before the artist residency, our interest in governance archaeology was a response to the demands of the present. The initial motivation for developing the database emerged through our collaborations in the Metagovernance Project, a researcher and practitioner collective focused on the design of online governance technologies. One of these technologies is CommunityRule, a web interface for authoring and publishing basic governance processes, developed in partnership with users such as mutual-aid groups and open-source developers.[24] Among those communities, we observed the need for a much wider range of options than what tends to be found among familiar civil society organizations and sample bylaws, particularly in the face of challenges like virtual collaboration and systemic racism. One of our ambitions with governance archaeology is to better serve diverse institutional forms: to ensure that the library of options available on tools such as CommunityRule reflects diverse political traditions, enabling users to draw from and build on

culturally relevant legacies. Without a governance archaeology approach, these tools might too easily fall into practices driven by unconscious assumptions based on the narrow experience of the developers. Yet the very act of software development always involves choices and assumptions. The posture of ancestry recognizes this as a way of consciously guiding the choices designers make.

We have presented the strategy of governance archaeology through our experience with building a database of collective governance practices. We hope to help confront what we perceive as a widespread crisis in democratic governance. Just as thinkers during the European Enlightenment did, we find ourselves turning to history in order to think through the urgency of now. But we depart from the eighteenth-century European by embedding our research efforts in a commitment to cultivate relationships of accountability and responsibility to the legacies we learn from, a commitment we think of as ancestry. To practice ancestry is to recognize that crafting a moral political economy will require not merely different institutional arrangements but living networks of relationship and accountability.

Institutions such as governments, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations have experienced strong pressure for homogeneity, particularly since World War II and the rise of "globalization" agreements seeking to standardize international trade. Such homogeneity facilitates capital flows across borders, but it has failed to provide governance that addresses the most dangerous outgrowths of those flows, such as wealth inequality and climate change. We turn to governance archaeology to broaden the institutional repertoire.

We have begun exploring this approach in the contexts of historical research, artistic practice, and software development. But the potential applications are much more expansive. In recent years, for instance, lottery-based citizen assemblies have been used to formulate climate policy, resembling a practice that was widespread in the ancient Athenian democracy and other less-known settings. Similar assemblies could be applied to govern other complex systems, such as digital algorithms.[25] Lottery-based assemblies can defuse polarization by creating space for careful study of contentious issues outside the pressures of partisan politics. Meanwhile, as the leverage of labor unions declines in many parts of the world, precarious workers might learn from older governance models like the medieval Muslim *halawa* financial system or European guilds, which were fundamentally networked and transnational. Designers of new blockchain-based systems, also, face a wide range of governance challenges that appear novel compared with those of existing governments and corporations. But blockchain developers might learn, for instance, from the many uses of cowrie shells in the premodern world, such as their use as money from Africa to China, or their role in establishing wampum contracts among Native Americans.[26]

Such adaptations should seek to embody ancestry, not further erasure. When we adapt, we can tell and retell the stories of where these ideas came from. We

can seek out relationships with, and learn from, a tradition's living descendants. While adopting a tradition that has been buried or silenced, we should set out to dismantle any forms of domination that have been part of that silencing.

In another time, the patient labor of assembling a database of historical governance practices might seem merely interesting or amusing. Today it strikes us as urgent. The future of democratic politics, economics, and civic life depends on expanding the repertoire of options, learning, wherever possible, from foregoing human experience and sharing it as a common inheritance. Yet the learning cannot be carried out as some previous generations have, through selective appropriation, colonization, and erasure visited on the very cultures providing inspiration. Governance archaeology is a craft and a call: to expand the wealth of political repertoires, but also, at the same time, to repair and tend to our relationships with the political ancestors whose lessons we need more than ever.

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ENDNOTES

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7 The website for the Metagovernance Project is http ://metagov.org.

8 We are grateful for the collaboration of curator Darija Medić and the opportunity to learn from the residents : Barabar (Bhawna Parmar and Rubina Singh), Mateus Guzzo, Caroline Sinders, Şerife Wong, Eryk Salvaggio, Ioanna Thymianidis, Mara Karagianni, Plot Twisters (Cat Chang and Jenny Liu Zhang), Mallory Knodel, Lotte de Jong, Antonia Hernández, and Amelia Winger-Bearskin. The exhibition is online at https://excavations.digital.

9 Thanks to grants from the Eutopia Foundation and the British Academy, we were able to benefit from the contributions of three student research assistants from King's College London : Jonas Nepozitek, Elizaveta Sharabok, and Fabio Carolla.

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