

Book Review: *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* by Ann Laura Stoler

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What shifts when we read along the archival grain as opposed to reading against it? What key insights might we garner about the social world that is purportedly captured by archival accounts but also the affective registers of such narratives? Ann Laura Stoler, in the context of her examination of the Dutch East Indies and the colonial archive, suggests that reading *along the grain* complicates our attempts to understand and unmask the impact of coloniality. She writes:

Reading along the archival grain draws our sensibilities to the archive's granular rather than seamless texture, to the rough surface that mottles its hue and shapes its form. Working along the grain is not to follow a frictionless course but to enter a field of force and will to power, to attend to both the sound and sense therein and their rival and reciprocal energies. It calls on us to understand how unintelligibilities are sustained and why empires remain so uneasily invested in them. (p. 53)

While Stoler is aware of how all forms of power are imbricated in the archive, that is, the archive is itself colonial, there are some affective tones and epistemic anxieties that seem to reframe our understanding of the scales at which colonial power is operative in the archive; a reframe that challenges the coherence of a single colonial project. For example, in her discussion of recordkeeping, Stoler points to contradictions and uncertainties in the colonizer's recording of their understanding of the world. She writes *archives are not simply accounts of actions or records of what people thought happened. They are records of uncertainty and doubt in how people imagined they*

could and might make the rubrics of rule correspond to a changing imperial world (4). Thus, the archive is inherently layered with different meanings. Reading along the grain appreciates the multilayeredness of these accounts and the place of what Stoler frames as the failures/failings of common-sense- a common sense that was *subject to revision and actively changed* (9). Her reading practice reminds me of Nadia Ellis' *Territories of the Soul* where she applies different theoretical and methodological approaches to recover narratives otherwise obscured and shows how subjectivities necessarily shape political and scholarly positions. Here she reads communication between CLR James and Constance Webb not to strip James of his accolades as a Caribbean intellectual but contextualize (like Stoler) how his affection toward Webb seeped into how he understood and navigated Britain and the United States. Both Ellis and Stoler then elucidate what is oft missed by shallow readings of the archive and what might be recuperated if read through a different analytic/theoretic lens-in this case, along the grain; disentangling the emotions and interior life of narrator as a pathway to understanding the deeper meaning embedded in a text.

Some of the central intervention that Stoler makes in Chapters one and two, that is *Prologue in Two Parts* and *The Pulse of the Archive* include highlighting the political and personal work that inscriptions perform (1); distinguishing between 'archiving as process' and 'archives as things' (20); pointing to the non-neutrality of records (23); underscoring the 'place' of the ephemeral (19) and carving a space for "*displaced histories, contrary and subjacent- but not necessarily subaltern-that hover in the archive's long shadows* (20). Also central is her search for the

pulse of the archive in the quiescence and quickened pace of its own production, in the steady and feverish rhythms of repeated incantations, formulae, and frames. [she pursues] it through the uneven densities of Dutch archival preoccupations and predicaments: where energies were expended, what conditioned the designation of an event, what visions were generated in the pursuit of prediction, which social group garnered concern and then did not (35).

The attitudes toward and treatment of *Inlandsche Kinderen* ((mixed blood) Indies born Dutch), protests in Java and pauperism, and poverty among European Settlers forms part of the evidentiary base for how Stoler supports these key points. In her discussion, she examines how sentiments of the colonizers played a role in the various policies regarding the agricultural colonies and which children would be allowed to remain in their homes. These policies had as much to do with whether colonizers felt mixed-bloods were displaying attitudes of attachments, indolence, or resentment toward their superiors. Her reflections on secrets, particularly the efforts to absent agent Valcks's claims about the discontent brewing among the colonized (25) indexes how the affective tremors and anxieties are inscribed in the archive, why it is non-neutral etcetera. To quote Stoler reflections at length:

Items about clandestine police maneuvers, military preparations, and deliberations about an impending revolt are what we expect to be marked as geheim, with an X. But sometimes promises of access to the unknown were bizarre fictions at best. Confidential documents both secret and secreta what becomes elevated to "vital" information. Throughout the official archives of the Dutch colonial state are documents earmarked for confidentiality that were not secrets at all....Similarly, classified missives on European beggars were less about what to do with the destitute than measures of disagreement and disquiet about how to racially classify those who fell into such straits. Reports on vagabond whites were "secret" in 1874 and not twenty-five years later when the public Pauper Commission appeared because officials could not agree on whether there were thirty-nine white paupers living among natives in the urban slums of Batavia, or thousands. Documents were sometimes marked geheim because of the magnitude of a problem, at other times because officials could not agree on a shared sense of what the problems were. Rather than secreted truths

about the state, they point to sites of unease, anticipatory warnings of emergent movement among subject populations (what Raymond Williams might even include as “structures of feeling”), of resentments that may not yet have had a name As Frederick Barth once observed, secrets do more than sanctify—they invoke deeper secrets of their own....Not least they invite disclosure. Critique emerges in the interstices of what goes without saying and what should not be said: sometimes documents referred to those who parodied commonsense conventions. As we shall see, the “dirty secrets” of Sumatra’s planters were in classified missives not because the planters’ abuses of their laboring populations were not known, but precisely because they were not to be acknowledged and aired by an “inept” civil servant like Frans Carl Valck. (27-28).

Given the year of Stoler’s publication (that is 2009), the assertions she makes about a reading practice capacious enough to hold nuance and account for the multilayeredness and at times contradictory nature of the colonial project, I imagine would have been quite illuminating. Even if this reading practice is unnamed or differently named, I feel it is a critical part of how ethnic studies and other interdisciplinary scholars have been wrestling with questions about how various bodies and nations have been cast into spaces of abjections and rendered disposable both by what has been captured by the colonial archive or what was silenced. Surely, this work can be situated within that genealogy- post-modernist, the post-colonial scholarship that is asking us to look and to listen, to trace fragments, and piece together what was left in the ellipses.