

Review: *Along the Archival Grain*, Anne Laura Stoler

By JK Fowler

“*Universals* appears to have two connotations. One is that of totality; in this sense, universal designates the whole world at all times. The other is one of generality: that which is applicable to a large number of instances.”¹

“Common sense has its own necessity; it asserts its right with the weapon peculiarly suitable to it, namely, appeal to the ‘obviousness’ of its claim and considerations.”²

“There are many kinds of eyes. Even the Sphinx has eyes—therefore there must be many kinds of ‘truths’ and consequently there can be no truth.”³

There are no absolutes, no guaranteed categories, no definitive markers, in essence no Truth. Conjecture erupts through momentary snippets of time, the seemingly insignificant recesses and grooves of innocuous objects (i.e. colonial missives and personal correspondence) and is constantly transformative, washing in and out of itself leaving remnants, what Pierre Bordieu referred to as “sedimented knowledge”⁴. As Wendy Brown states, convictions [i.e. Truth] “are, precisely, refusals to allow history and contingency to contour the existing dimensions and possibilities of political life”⁵. Convictions bred, born, and fed in the colonial conscious and unconscious mind are exactly what Ann Stoler attempts to challenge within *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Stoler wrangles with the process of colonial archiving in the 19th century Netherlands Indies as one not filled with conviction and certitude but rather, constant uncertainty filled with gaps, of questioned credibility and rumor. Stoler maps (to reference Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the ‘map’) out a colonial heritage through a genealogy, a genealogy that is “neither an ‘acquisition’ nor a ‘possession that grows and solidifies’ but [is] an ‘unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile interior from within or from underneath”⁶. In the following few pages, I hope to accomplish four things: to discuss what I mean by genealogy and Stoler’s relationship to Foucault and Nietzsche in her book, where we find Foucault’s notion of the emergent history, how it is conceived as well as what work it does, to discuss Stoler’s choice of Frans Carl Valck as agent of colonial sentiment, and finally, offer a few questions that the work brought forth in light of genealogy, archival work, historical ethnographies and in reference to the formulation of my own work.

¹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and The Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 3.

² Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: On the Essence of Truth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977), 118.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968), 252.

⁴ Pierre Bordieu, *Outline A Theory of Practice: Structures and the Habitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 79.

⁵ Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 94.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (New York: Pantheon Books), 82.

A man places the record “Kind of Blue” by Miles Davis on the turntable, a woman screams at her child as the blouses and trousers flutter in the wind on the laundry line stretched taut between two crumbling brick walls, a car sounds its horn in the distance and a silently operating multitude of operations have brought us here, to this point, at this particular moment, through the “endlessly repeated play of dominations”⁷. Genealogy, as envisioned by Foucault and Nietzsche, destabilizes notions of origin, that fixed point from where a particular moment, person, or event has evolved. It cultivates details and takes notice of the accidents which accompany every beginning, plumbs and excavates the depths and awaits eruptions and emergents⁸. In short, it is cognizant of the utter complexities constantly at play in historicized or imagined moments of origin and thus, explodes any preconceived notions of Truth. Through this lens of constant inconsistency, Foucault states that, “every sentiment, particularly the most disinterested, has a history”⁹. And so it is, in a very real sense that Stoler takes head-on the notion that, “the mastery of reason, rationality, and the inflated claims made for Enlightenment principles have been at the political foundation of colonial regimes”¹⁰. Instead, she argues, things are a bit more complicated. Hesitation, anxiety, uncertainty, fear, confliction, and irrationality could often be found within the fissures of the Dutch colonial project in the Indies and she reveals such conflictual sentiments through ‘minor’ histories in the archives which attend to structures of feeling and force that in ‘major’ history might be otherwise displaced¹¹. It is through focusing on such ‘minor’ histories that Stoler reinvigorates Foucault’s notion of the emergent, “the entry of forces...their eruption, the leap from the wings to center stage, each in its youthful strength”¹². By focusing in on the entrance exams of the Indies civil service, the demonstrations at the Harmonie Club on May 22, 1848, the Inlandsche Kinderen (pauperized whites) and resulting state commissions of inquiry, the Matray agricultural colony in France, Frans Carl Valck, and the Luhmann family murders, Stoler pushes up and through the façade of a unified, hegemonic colonial force and the emergent leaks forth from conflictual accounts of mistrust, rumor, love, pain—in short, sentiment. Stoler’s sense of the ‘sentiment’ is not opposed to political reason but act as modalities or tracers of it; as judgments, assessments and interpretations of the social and political world¹³. These sentiments reveal more than they conceal and beg us as readers to question the importance of the sidelined, the seemingly innocuous, or the mundane. This questioning, as Wendy Brown states in reference to Nietzsche, “produces an experience of vertigo, and the vertigo gives way to demand. The demand is not of a conventional political sort but rather seeks new knowledge—vertiginous knowledge”¹⁴. The archive, seen in this light and through the lens which Stoler fuses her work together through, is torn asunder and the infinite screams to be noticed between the

⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁸ Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 101.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (New York: Pantheon Books), 87.

¹⁰ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 58.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (New York: Pantheon Books), 84.

¹³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 40.

¹⁴ Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 98.

interstices of words on archival documents, the space between photographed subjects and most importantly, within that which is not said. She focuses instead on archival form: “prose style, repetitive refrain, the arts of persuasion, affective strains that shape ‘rational’ response categories of confidentiality and classification, and genres of documentation”¹⁵. Knowledge is sought but never garnered and labeled as such and the interrogative replaces the declarative in much of Stoler’s work. Colonial sentiment is thus sought through an emergent history and it needs to be understood how she employs this within her work.

Stoler begins part one of her book (entitled “*Colonial Archives and their Affective States*”) writing against the “Weberian model of rationally-minded, bureaucratically drive states outfitted with a permanent and assured income to maintain them, buttressed by accredited knowledge and scientific legitimacy and backed by a monopoly on weaponed force”¹⁶. Although successful in doing so, how does she succeed and what does such a pursuit do?

Continues for four more pages. Please contact JK Fowler at roaminghills@gmail.com for the full piece.

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¹⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.