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Despair at knowing what you do not know

A conversation with Ann Laura Stoler

Patricia Purtschert

About the many futures of gender

The aim of the project is to tell and reflect the different histories of feminist theory. To this end, conversations are held with protagonists who had and have a formative influence on feminist theories. In engaging with these scholars, we wish to delve deeper not only into the ideas and concepts that form the key basis of these theories but also to explore the historical contexts, collective thinking, political practices, and historical controversies that enabled them at the time. The conversations bring forth exigent questions around power, inequality, and violence, intersectionality, the relation of sex, gender, and sexuality, or the critique of binary thinking. We discuss the contributions of feminism to analyzing and challenging significant differences other than gender, such as race, class, nationality, religion, and caste. The project is rooted in oral history and philosophical exchange. It has value for those of us interested in the history of feminist theory and in feminism as a resourceful way of challenging dominant knowledges and creating different ones.

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Despair at knowing what you do not know: A conversation with Ann Laura Stoler

Patricia Purtschert

I stroll through Central Park in New York, still early for the interview scheduled at Ann Stoler's house nearby. When I enter her front yard a little later, I ring the bell, a dog barks, I hear voices, and Ann opens the door. She leads me to her office on the ground floor, which is, as I will soon find out, also an archive. I sit down, settle in, and switch on the recorder.

Patricia Purtschert: Thank you so much, Ann, for agreeing to have this conversation. I would like to start with the following question: Do you remember when feminism entered your world?

Ann Laura Stoler: Very much so. I was finishing my undergraduate degree at Barnard College in New York, where I thought of what I was doing as thinking about exploitation and the division of labor. Among us eager neophyte Marxists, we were intent on reading Marx and trying to understand how those who saw themselves as Marxist historians and those writing more generally on contemporary capitalism approached Marx: Issues of exploitation—what we now call "extraction"—saturated the political air. I thought I was going with my partner for the summer to Java, intent on finding out about an issue that had not really been posed about the much-lauded Green Revolution's introduction of high-yielding rice varieties and new and improved pesticides. Yields were up but no one had asked about the effects on landless women, for whom harvesting the pre-high-yielding rice varieties made up one of their only sources of income.

I imagined it to be an interlude before graduate school. It was not. I stayed for a year and half, taken with people, how they occupied their space, the pervasive vagrant spicy smells, the place, the absence of waste baskets—there was nothing not repurposed and re-used. The Green Revolution was to be the fix to forge "development." As the World Bank put it in l972, it was "designed" to reach "the poorest of the poor." The new rice varieties could be harvested with the slash of a sickle, a tool of men. Women had traditionally used a small tool, two pieces attached at right angles with a razor blade inserted in the middle—they deftly poised it between two fingers. But the new rice varieties grew more evenly, a sickle to sweep across the level stalks. The losses for some landless women were worse, with no seeds scattered on the ground after the harvest—with the sickle, nothing was left.

So it was all to their disadvantage, this "Green Revolution"?

To the disadvantage of those without land and of women directly. With larger tracts of rice fields, just a few men were contracted to do the work. In the decades since the early 1970s with what had been the "tsunami" of insecticides, rice plants were vulnerable to parasites destroying whole crops. I was not there to witness that.

I thought I knew what "fieldwork" was but had no real idea I had to do it with my rudimentary Indonesian and Javanese limited to greetings, simple questions, whose answers by women were invariably in Javanese, not Indonesian. I feigned to understand. When not counting numbers of people and things, I watched. Some of the time I hid in the shelter of a tiny hatched appendage to the main house of the village head with my then soul mate, Ben White. Nineteenth-century British novels were a staple. I have rarely gone near them to this day, unless they were written by colonial Europeans, of their despair, privileges, and white performance.

But watching women mattered: It was they who culled bananas from the trees in the house gardens, papaya and eatable leaves to cook, wild spinach on the rice fields' borders, ginger for medicinal drinks, coconuts. It was they who walked miles at dawn to the markets to sell three coconuts at a time. Virtually no one, bent on studying Java's poor, was looking at the productivity of house gardens and the work of women in them. It was the women who cooked down the hard slaps made from the coconuts the men climbed high to reach. It was the women who sold two or three or four for a few rupiah, a few cents, in the local markets. This was not the "informal sector." It was not the "additional" income. For some, it was their primary source of rupiah, Indonesia's currency, to buy rice but also "use-value" directly for nourishment.

How did your studies in the US prepare you to study what you later encountered in Indonesia?

I started Columbia graduate school on fire—I had decided not to take up a four-year doctoral fellowship at Berkeley to study Chinese—but there were too many numbers to count, too much "data" that was overwhelming. Still, I published what I saw, what I had counted, what limited amount I could learn about those on the edge, living among hectares of exquisite rice fields, stretching miles and miles—the sharp discrepancy between what they had and what was the imaginary of Central Java.[1] Massive mainframe computers were emergent for those with the courage and technical facility to use them. I was terrified of them, but a friend, Lawrence Hirschfeld, who became my life partner, took to crunching my house garden numbers. It is to him I owe the fact that I was able to show that these house gardens were precious sources of income, if hardly wealth, largely generated by rural women and rarely acknowledged as such.

But what most struck me at the time was the huge discrepancy between the villagers who were well-off and those who were dirt poor—their homes, the food they ate, the arduous labor the latter performed, and the extent to which children took over work that freed women up for minimally more lucrative work. That was indeed the subject of Ben's research, the cost and value of children in rural Java.[2]

That sense of enormous inequality in opportunity and resources for those who had little to depend on—besides the client relations by which they were tied—animated the first essay I wrote, unpopular with those students with whom I shared our relatively new feminist calling. That essay, "Class structure and female autonomy,"[3] stayed steeped in what I thought was

1 Ann Laura Stoler, Rice-harvesting in Kali Loro: A study of class and labor relations in rural Java (1977).

2 Benjamin White, The economic importance of children in a Javanese village (1976).

3 Ann Stoler, Class structure and female autonomy in rural Java (1977).

the most striking source of inequality, its first line emblematic: "Class is analytically prior to gender." Would I write that now? With declarative assertion? No, I would not.

What kind of political knowledge and experience did you bring with you at the time, as a young researcher? In other words, when and how have you been politicized?

Left politics and being a young woman sometimes came together in ugly ways. My earliest memory as a high school student in New York was marching against the war. I wanted to do more than march. I wanted to go to Vietnam. I was arrested, as many of us well-heeled Barnard and Columbia students were, but those protests were made up of many others whose range of radical politics I am not sure I even understood. I hardly knew anyone drafted, the war was wrong, but getting arrested on Fifth Avenue and marching around Columbia's periphery seemed even at the time a cheap and paltry notion of political engagement. But there was also the beginning of a feminist rage. During the occupation of one of Columbia's buildings, Hamilton Hall, I was among the women students asked to make the peanut butter sandwiches while the boys and men got up on the windowsills to preach. That was a sort of beginning and end.

Come on!

We really were. It was fall l968.

Do you think that your interest in feminism had to do with your education at Barnard, a famous women's college?

No, not really. I wish I could say that was true, and perhaps if I had spent more time at Barnard rather than hanging out at Columbia, I would have been more affected by what Barnard clearly had to offer. I was there in part because my elder sister had gone to Barnard, and was an assistant professor of Sanskrit and Asian studies the year I entered, when Columbia was still not accepting women. So I thought this was second-best—that I could take classes across the street in the graduate department in anthropology. I took so many that my world shifted to the graduate department before I was even accepted into the doctoral program. It was in Java that women's work and the discrepancies between women's choices and those of men were on my mind. My first seminar on this topic was taught by the only young woman on the faculty—who was later not tenured—on the sexual division of labor. Gender as a concept was still on my horizon. When I started teaching, my seminar was the first on women's work in anthropology—note that I am still not yet using the term "gender"—at the University of Wisconsin in 1983.

When you designed that class, did you do this on your own, or were you part of a group that tried to bring feminism and gender studies into academia?

Yes and no. I had been writing my dissertation in Paris for three years. Arriving in Madison, I was as shocked by the Midwest as I was by the excitement of teaching. I tentatively was going

to meetings and lectures at the women's studies program, intimidated to even speak up in the presence of senior, established feminists who already were making their mark: I knew about Marxism and labor exploitation. I knew about how poor women were shafted in Java. I did not know feminist theory, so I hovered on the edge of the "Women's Studies Collective" awed by the "real" feminists: Gerda Lerner, Ruth Bleier, Judy Walkowitz, Linda Gordon, Susan Friedman: women who had already put their feminist stamp on the academic world.

When I was up for tenure six years later, they stood behind me. I was being harassed by the stereotype of a sexist department chair. Their advice—get tenure first, then nail him. Instead I went on research leave to Paris and got a tenured offer from the University of Michigan in a set of rapid-fire phone calls when I was there. I never looked back. My interest in colonialisms, plantations, the politics of history and gender were almost outside the bounds of anthropology in Madison: In Ann Arbor there was actually a surge of interest in them. It was a fortuitous moment—a new joint PhD program in history and anthropology was just launched, and I became part of its making. There was intellectual and political energy in the synergy between anthropology and history—and more. It being a college town, there was community at the university, comradeship, shared dinners with children crawling under the table.

I left 15 years later for the New School for Social Research, in my mind's eye where philosophy mattered, and where the political was everywhere. It fulfilled an imaginary in which I felt I could do new things and dare to take on what I did not know. The first week I was at the New School, I attended a lecture on Heidegger by the riveting philosopher Simon Critchley, who was to become a dear friend. It was at 8 p.m., and the auditorium was full. I wondered how so many could sign up for one seminar. They did not—only five were registered. The rest of the room was probably eager for the content and the performance—the curious, the avid, probably schooled and neophyte philophilias like me. Simon lecturing on Heidegger was an event. During my second week at the New School, the philosopher extraordinaire Richard Bernstein came to my office with a framed, stunning photograph of the young Hannah Arendt. I did not know if it was a call or a challenge. He did not say a word—the gift and its binding of an intellectual and political contract were enough.

This was also the time when gender studies started to emerge—the term "gender" was used by John Money and Robert Stoller in their psychiatric work from the 1940s on and was introduced into feminist studies in the early 1970s by Ann Oakley. But it took some years until it made its way into broader feminist discussions. Do you remember how you first came across "gender"?

No, I do not. But it was not in the mid-l970s. My first publication was in the new feminist journal *Signs*, and it was not gender but "*female* autonomy" in my title.[4] Women's studies at the time struck me as too pat and narrow—dissertations were coming out on "the role of women in x, y, or z"—the answer given before the start. It was a "topic," not a question. I opened that first article contentiously with the sentence: "Class relations are analytically prior to male-female relations."

4 Ann Stoler, Class structure and female autonomy in rural Java (1977).

When I started dissertation research in 1977, I did so in what I saw as the capitalist "belly of the beast"—North Sumatra's massive plantation belt. The political and economic terrain was different, so was the imprint of sex and race. In Dutch colonial histories of the plantations, official archives, and elsewhere, sex and domestic labor of Javanese women, procured by European planters, was hard to miss. New colonial categories were in the making, tailored for what was later to be called agribusiness—the issues of access, denial, payment, and coercion were there everywhere and made invisible except in the soil, bodies, and air. Still, I do not think my central interest was in "gender" but in gender inequities as part of a broader set of inequalities on which colonialism did and was to depend.

Writing my thesis in Paris, I was invited to direct a new women's studies program at the University of Amsterdam. With the offer *de facto* agreed upon, the friendly question of the committee brought the amiable discussion to an abrupt halt—"Ann, where do you see women's studies going in the next decade?" My reply was—"Well, I imagine it should disappear and that we should be working on, with, and about women's subordination everywhere." Silence—the *de facto* "offer" was rescinded, and a real one was not made. Lecturing on colonial governance and archives years later, the room would be full of women and men. Lecturing on "gender," there were only women there.

I think that early moment in women and gender studies was to effect a broader choice; I did not want to speak to the converted—sorry for the cliché—but to a wider audience for whom sexuality, intimacies, and colonial power had virtually no currency, no salience. It was in fact viewed as a skewed, warped sense of colonialism and history itself. Sherry Ortner once said to me, when I was still an associate professor at Michigan: "Annie, you are a theorist. You can play with the big guys." It was a forked comment—a compliment, when theory mattered with a capital T, but from a friend, maybe also a critical warning.

You did an important job out there with the "big boys."

Let me try to be frank, Patricia—my aspirations were not to be at the forefront of gender studies so much as providing the analytic and empirical challenge to a myopic notion of history and politics, where the intimate—between women and children, between Javanese nursemaids and European children, between European men and their Javanese "housemaids"—was never understood as a matrix of power.

And you did it: Your work is changing and challenging different fields, from Foucauldian studies to colonial and imperial studies to feminist and sexuality studies. I always saw your work as bringing different fields into new conversations, posing questions back to each of these fields.

That is really wonderful of you to say. In a relatively recent lecture, I used the term "non-disciplinary."[5] The person who invited me after the lecture said, "You know, you stand for me as the person who refuses interdisciplinarity." I felt vindicated for my refusals to follow a certain ethnographic course. Philosophy was already a passion; deep, detailed history was as well.

5 Kyiv School of Economics, public lecture series broadcasted on April 13, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brPtbViv8xo

Today I often say that I am committed to a radical adisciplinarity. Anthropology seemed to be a way of allowing me the freedom to keep Marx and Rosa Luxemburg forefront, not Radcliffe-Brown. I found it sad that the famous Raymond Firth's wife, Rosemary, got to write books about housekeeping in Malaya; younger anthropologists never heard her name; her research was considered minor work. Few anthropologists even know what she wrote. Foucault and Nietzsche held enormous sway over the questions I tried to formulate and to ask.

But you also had to find your way in academia as someone who does things differently. I imagine that this was not an easy path.

I brought up Linda Gordon earlier, from whom I learned so much as a friend and colleague when we were both in Madison, because her experience, just one generation earlier, was so different from my own. She recounted having trouble getting published. I do not remember it ever being a problem. That does not mean that sexisms were not part of the publishing world. There are too many stories that others and I could tell. Still, it was not a matter of getting published; it was about the process, the treatment, the applause and the slights that were always there. For two different books at two prominent presses, when my books were published, they were barely advertised by two male editors. When I complained to the editors in chief, they both agreed and reissued each of the books, one with an entirely new preface and cover, and sales witnessed a small explosion those few years later.

Why do you think that was the case?

Clearly, there was a shift from Linda's generation to my own, but also in "our respective fields." Her generation fought to get in. For my generation, there was not only more room but a developing and expanding interest. Sometimes it was hard though to distinguish sexism from an aversion to a scholarship that clearly was not, and had no intention to be, "neutral," "objective," shorn of politics. Of course the "objective" was as political as those of us who invested in and claimed the salience of the politics of history, and histories of the present.

I got treacherously slammed by Clifford Geertz when I came up for tenure. It is a story I have told elsewhere.[6] I knew Geertz was going to be asked for a tenure letter so I wrote him in advance. He answered: "Of course, it would be my pleasure." His letter was a lambast, he clearly wrote that I should never get tenure, my work was political, not anthropology. His evaluation was ignored. The tenure decision was unanimous. His animus, in part, had to do with my and Ben White's critique of Geertz's irresponsible notion of "shared poverty" in rural Java, but I have also always wondered about the gender dynamic as well. Natalie Zemon Davis, a mentor in the sky, invited me to Princeton and at the dinner table placed me next to Geertz. He would not say a word. She tried.

6 Amrit Dev Kaur and Sanne Ravensbergen, History as renegade politics: An interview with Ann Laura Stoler (2016).

These are impressive examples of how academia constituted an androcentric, patriarchal space. But you made clear as well that women's groups were not necessarily the answer for you. May I ask you, did you have a certain unease toward feminist groups?

I find your question interesting. It was not only feminist groups that made me uncomfortable but also the confines of what one was supposed to do as an anthropologist or historian. I will never think philosophy as does a philosopher, nor will I know the range of philosophers that need to be read. I have been reading philosophy, trying to read deeply and genealogically, for nearly 20 years. My interest and attention to "concept work" and what I call "conceptual methodology" comes very much out of the imbrication of history and philosophy. But I do not really belong. I hope to work hard enough to be assiduously close to what Gaston Bachelard once identified as his task, "an epistemology of the detail." It is a notion that primes me, requiring not only what to ask but also how to do so.

Disciplinary strictures make me feel uneasy, as you noted, in French, *coincé*. It strikes me as a tunnel vision. My first class as a fledging assistant professor was on the politics of insurgency in Vietnam and, more broadly, Southeast Asia. The course was to be on "Southeast Asia," as I taught it, a US military fiction imposed for strategic counter-insurgency and warfare. The term "Southeast Asia" was an invention, never a part of a local nomenclature, only a military imposition and convenience. That was my first course in anthropology.

What is the link between what you just described—how you moved between different circles and traditions and did not really belong to them—and your writing? When I was preparing for this interview and going through your books again, I realized that what is so gripping and challenging about your work is that you never settle down in your thinking and never make things comfortable.

Oh, Patricia! You are amazing.

I mean, I read your work, and I think, "Now I have a grasp of her insight." Then the next sentence dashes against this one and breaks it up again. It unsettles previous notions and looks at them from a new angle. Whenever things get settled …

… I get impatient, I get uncomfortable.

Even in relation to your own work.

Absolutely. Despair at knowing what you do not know.

Foucault offers us two piercing definitions of critique: "The art of reflexive insolence," i.e., a refusal to wallow in one's certitudes, learning to let them go, leaving more room for query. His other sense of critique, too, stops one short: to pursue "an ethics of discomfort." I stand by both and discuss with my students the implications of what discomfort means in the range of contexts in which they may work, while reminding myself, and them, of the dangers of comfort zones no matter how radical and brazen they may feel and seem at one time.

The impatience you note is not something laudatory but you are right. Edward Said's *Orientalism* had just come out in 1978. I was taken, as were so many, by his politics, his language, his knowledge, his perception, but still wondered if he was right when he wrote that women on the bottom and men on the top was a good "metaphor" of colonial relations of power. The timing of reading and rereading that line converged with my first reading of Foucault, suffocating in a Paris apartment, now a luxury site beyond the famous "La Coupole," with virtually no one but my partner to challenge what I wanted to but feared to say. Said was a hero to me as he was to many others. It took me a few more years to question him in print, convinced that this was no metaphor of colonialism, but those sexual relations were a constituent element of how colonialism imposed its distinctions, how it operated, and the *dispositif* [7] it installed.

It was to be the first time I decided not to hide the question in a vague sentence. I feared I was alone in asking it. As it turned out I was not. I became more convinced that you do not have to have an answer or have a solution to what you pose. What you need is to develop a good question that matters, and this pushes you further.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I had a group of feminist friends and colleagues in England, several of whom I had first met at a conference in Poland in 1975, just after I returned from Java and before I started graduate school. It was a heady experience: Some were part of the *Critique of Anthropology* journal and collective, an alternative and leftist take on what anthropology should be and do; among them were Elizabeth Croll working on feminism and socialism in China, Mary McIntosh, and Kate Young. There was Carmen Diana Deere, whose work most closely allied with mine. Maria Mies joined us at another time.

I was among the youngest among them. I always felt inadequate and on the edge. I was in Paris, just finishing writing my thesis, when they asked me to give a talk at Sussex. It was a small disaster. I quoted Foucault's iconic phrase: that "sexuality is a dense transfer point of power." They looked at me as if betrayed and asked why I needed Foucault to say that. I answered, neither meekly nor forcefully, "Because he said it, and showed it, in ways that no one else did."

Were they expecting you to cite feminist authors?

Yes, we were riveted on the fact that so much Marxist writing had virtually nothing to say about social reproduction and the vital work of women in that process, for factory work in England, on the plantations in Sumatra. The wages for housework debate movement in the 60s made the argument, and we amplified its global resonance. But it was not work about sex or sexuality at all. I do not remember sexual relations ever being mentioned. In the end, I do not know if I receded from them or they from me. I remained friends with some but we seemed to be moving in different directions. I was unsure but taken with Foucault. I never said aloud or in print that I found their concentrated focus confining.

Was this a lonely place to be in, this kind of discomfort you describe; were you alone, or were you sometimes having other people, other than the feminists you mentioned, thinking along

7 Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Gender, race, and morality in colonial Asia (1991).

with you? When you, for example, felt like you wanted to use Foucault's work because he was important, in what ways were you exposing yourself in that moment?

It is interesting you use that word—"exposed." That is what I felt—anxious, nervous. Migraines always followed. I do not really feel I had a mentor. My first was Marvin Harris—it was a tumultuous relationship—approving, disapproving all the time, but maybe I too craved those assessments. Giving a presentation in our weekly department seminars, I was not sure why I was there. My research in Java was so preliminary, it seemed almost untoward to be presenting it during my first years of graduate school. It was on class disparities in rural Java. When Marvin's response afterwards was that I betrayed him, I was astounded, I did not even get his critique at the time. I thought I was still within a "Harris" frame. He sought his answers in what he called "cultural materialism," an approach that did not wholly dismiss mental representations—though many disparaged and turned away from him because they thought he did. It was a contentious time. Anthropology at Columbia was sharply divided between those who thought symbolism mattered and those like Marvin who did not.

Marvin's refusal to accept any other explanation of the world but his own came out in a sexism so engrained, "normalized," and of which he was oblivious. Many women graduate students worked with him, but I do not think he had any idea of his effect on those students and faculty around him. I got blasted by it. Getting ready for fieldwork in Indonesia, I asked him to write a recommendation for a fellowship. He did so swiftly and brought me the letter with pride, saying, "I have just written you a wonderful letter." I read its final line: "Someday Ann will be as outstanding as her husband, Ben."[8]

No way!

I was aghast and somehow found the gumption to say: "Marvin, how could you write a letter like that?" He was furious. He shouted, "How could you be so ungrateful? This is one of the strongest letters I have ever written in my life. Get out of my office." I think he cursed, but I cannot remember. Obviously, that was the end of our adviser and advisee relationship. I left and cried. And turned to a rather cold-hearted British anthropologist at Barnard, Joan Vincent, who degraded and praised me in equal measure.

Did Marvin Harris intend to hurt you or was he serious about it?

He was serious. Ben was seen by many as one of the department's stars. I was still a precocious undergrad working in squatter gardens where and when we met. I was not sure what it would mean to be "political" in a way that mattered and I knew I was not close. I found Marvin forceful and compelling—his Marxism was twisted and barely present, but there was still a strong sense of the "unfair," of the "exploited," of his commitment to get at how people were pulled to the bottom and were forced to stay there.

8 The letter refers to Benjamin N. F. White.

But still he did not understand why you would be enraged!

Hardly. You know, we are talking about 1975, when what Marvin wrote and said to me would not have caused the batting of an eye.

But let me return for a moment to the discomfort you have noted that energizes me. I like to perch on cliffs but not too close. When I was younger, I skied faster than most of the boys but not so fast as to crash, jumped horses, rode them, as we were taught, without reins, fell, found dirt on my face and in my braces, and then was forced to get on the horse again. A colleague once called me gutsy, but I think it was more the challenge to occupy a tenuous danger and remain basically safe. It really is a tense story about the strains between being the daughter of a father who fought to achieve and a daughter who rejected the means he used to do so … Maybe someday I will talk about his factory in what I did not know at the time was a poor Black area of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and his daily commute to where we lived in the plush suburbs of Manhattan. It is not another story, but a powerfully subjacent part of the 1950s-designed engineering of "white flight." At work, his high-end car was parked in an adjacent part of the building … with an automatic garage door. He never said it but when I visited, I knew I should never stray outside the factory door. He had come from the tenements of lower Manhattan, married a beautiful Russian girl, and turned paper-printing machines into ones for plastic at the very start of the credit card industry. He was hard, soft, smart, and was intolerable of my commitment to a left-wing politics.

Let me get back at this point to a crucial part of your work: What made you start looking into the intimate, emotions, sentiments, all these formative aspects of human relations that deeply inform the sphere of the social and the political, and that were so heavily neglected by researchers for the longest time?

The first piece I wrote on sentiment remains an unpublished conference paper, "Thinking through sentiment and political economy," that I wrote roughly in 1985. I was not sure what I was after but I remember being struck by the flat and narrow way in which Marx's concept of "alienation" was treated, relegated to the labor process, hardly touching on the despair, fury, and indignation that defined and fueled it. It took me another 10 years to put it again on paper, first with courses on the politics of sentiment and "affective states"—variations of which I have taught for almost 25 years.

This was largely before affect studies became hot. Many of those graduate students and others smitten with "affect" would have done well to read 18th- and 19th-century treatises in philosophy and political "theory," where the knowledge of sentiments was understood to be intimately tied to the capacity to rule, where the passions and reason were always on the table.

For some similar reasons, I have been troubled by the excitement around "intersectionality" as if it was a new notion, not firmly explored and explicated for at least the last two decades among those many of us whose work on colonial relations consistently affirmed that understanding of colonial relations of power had to be approached by understanding the braiding of class, sex, race, and gender. That work is never referenced, nor mentioned. But then we live with short-circuited intellectual and political genealogies in so many ways. Black studies has clearly and

acutely shown how consistently Black authors have been excluded, excised, and refused from history's canons. We need to teach our students about why these more inclusive, capacious genealogies so matter and why they are often truncated, cut off, and erased. Some erasures are attributed to ignorance. I think we need to think, with respect to others and ourselves, how much ignoring, the gesture and fact of "looking away"—something I have argued in so much work—is as importantly there as well.

In 1995, you wrote Race and the education of desire.[9] *On the one hand you were challenging Foucault for his Western-centric framework, and on the other, you were challenging colonial studies for engaging with Foucault but not with his history of sexuality. What made you bring these two things together in this way, research on colonialism and sexuality?*

I did not have to bring them together. They were there. Those imaginaries, fears, and policings were in the colonial archives. Prostitution, "white trash," poor whites who could not possibly be considered really white, women who chose to marry or live with a native man were splattered across unlikely documents and places. The officials were constantly trying to define what it was to be white, who was mixed, and what that meant for their access to schooling, employment, social status. These were the footnotes of the legal texts, these were in the pamphlets. The manuals for European women new to the Indies focused ostensibly on staying healthy, but the subscript was clear—how to remain a real white, an immune white, and ever and clearly European.

At the Bibliothèque Nationale [BN] in Paris and on sabbatical for the year in 1987, with a two-year-old and a three-and-a-half-year-old in tow, I would cut across from our antiseptic apartment near the Centre Pompidou to the BN and spend most of the day scouring colonial manuals on what to prepare for, i.e., what to do and not to do as you established your racial rank as European. The BN had materials I would have expected to be in archives: manuals, short autobiographies, bizarre items that no one probably knew where to place. I had not yet been to the French archives.

Issues of sexuality and sexual relations were sometimes muted, sometimes in bold type. White women were utterly constrained; Javanese women doing intermittent contract work on the plantations were paid half men's wages, were refused regular jobs, and were critical to the material support of their families as market traders, food stall cooks, tenders of small rice fields, not to speak of the social reproduction of the households themselves. I knew it for colonial and contemporary Indonesia, but when I learned of the 1926 Women's Protection Ordinance in New Guinea, I remember being astounded—I should not have been—that the instrumentalization of sex, racism, and the protection of white women's prestige and purity was so explicit, so confirming of what many knew. So I was assured that I had not exaggerated nor invented these topics. I just read legal documents, ordinances, and "secret" colonial state documents in more scrupulous ways—and as much of them as I could. Sometimes I turned to those folders labeled "miscellaneous"—containing what did not fit their operative categories.

9 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's History of sexuality and the colonial order of things* (1995).

You have to know how to read them differently, though. What you show in your work is that it is not about stable categories such as colonialism or sexuality. Colonialism is not about a system that is set up once and then works forever. It is about the changeability of these concepts and how people dealt with this constant instability. How did you learn to look at the material this way?

You have described so accurately what I have tried to convey—it is ever shifting, changing, sometimes blind to what needed to be changed as colonial regimes were challenged by unruly subjects.

I became more and more attentive to what was on the ground, paper or plantation fields, not theory, again with that imposing capital "T." I often learned that what I thought was right. Take the issue of *métissage*, "hybridity," children straddling the colonial divide. In some colonies, it was considered the most threatening danger. Other times it was actually part of the colonial project or the celebration of a nationalist one. There was no uniformity. As often, it was what I saw as Foucault's warning not to look for someone's theory but a way of thinking. I still hold that dear … and one other lesson—"If I was going to come out after writing this the same way as I went in, then there is no point in writing it."

So that notion of having a theory and plopping it on something seemed to me not even worth doing. I wanted the analytics to come from the bottom up, not top down. My essay on racial regimes of truth felt importantly contrary and closer to how racisms changed on the ground.[10] I republished it in *Duress*[11] 20 years later. I sought to argue that essentialisms are there, but they are not fixed and identified by the same attributes; they do not stay unchanged. My insight came out of archival materials over decades. Essentialisms are powerful not because they are fixed but because they are malleable, protean, and politically attentive to the world in which new exclusions are responsive.

The features that make up those essences of being Black, Chicano, or white change, as David Roediger's work and that of many others shows as well. In the Dutch colonial archives, there were debates about how to classify "poor whites" as paupers in the European sense, or in the native sense, and thus welfare payments for these people were never considered. That subjacent debate was exemplary of racial essentialism's tactical mobility.

How can you handle that lack of clarity when you are confronted with it in the archives and do not want to squash it?

I see one choice: to bring those concerns of governance centerfold, to confront the conflict of government agents, high and low, as to which ruling would be more or less efficacious. In that process, I found myself increasingly attracted to the sensibilities and anxieties that emerged from marginalia in the debates and documents, in asides in footnotes or on the margins of official correspondence. There might be an inked splash of annoyance or dissension across a page. And so you need to ask what counts as evidence of degradations and prestige: how one speaks and what languages they master? Comportment or disposition? An inclination of European

10 Ann Laura Stoler, Racial histories and their regimes of truth (1997).
11 Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial durabilities in our times* (2016).

children preferring to crouch in Javanese style on their haunches, or what they preferred to eat, rice or Dutch-style boiled potatoes? How do you keep children firmly identifying as white? Segregated schools starting at 12, nine, or six years of age? There was nothing arbitrary about this. Some medical advisers feared that infants would become more attached to the smell and taste of a milk that was not that of their mother. This was not true everywhere, but in Java it was certainly the case. Touch, smell, and taste were elements in the racialized making and securing of distinct desires. I turned to those details of the intimate, proximities, and senses in the everyday.

Yes. You have really opened up a door, showing us new ways of thinking about the intimate as being central to colonial politics.

The intimate is a charged zone of the tense and tender, potentially full of violence.[12] My friend and colleague the philosopher Adi Ophir writes of the intimacy of torture, the pain and pleasures, the smells and sounds. The intimate permeating those scenes in other ways.

That reminds me of your new preface to Carnal knowledge*, where you critique yourself with regard to "intimacies of another register,"*[13] *saying that one needs to think of physical atrocities such as beatings, rape, and torture as intimate acts.*

So interesting you should say that, because when the book was translated into French, they moved that self-critique from the front to the back as an "epilogue." They argued that you cannot critique yourself before people read the book.

I had a telling experience with University of California Press. An accomplished anthropology editor, committed to a notion of the field that harked back to two decades earlier, gave me a contract for the *Carnal knowledge* book when all I had was an essay to convert into the first chapter. It took me a decade to finish the book, but when I did, and he hardly marketed it, I asked why. His answer: "Ann, come on, these are really only a bunch of old essays."

The editor in chief did not agree. She saw it otherwise, as on the cusp of an emerging approach and field. She had me write a new preface, and I suppose it was to become what she had imagined it would be.

And it is a ground-breaking book. Reading that book and getting that argument, how the intimate, sexuality, childrearing, reproduction are in the middle of colonial politics. To me, it was eye-opening; I always had the sense that these issues need to be in the middle of things, but your book showed me how to think about them.

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12 See the first two essays (both by Stoler) in Ann Laura Stoler (Ed.), *Haunted by empire: Geographies of intimacy in North American history* (2006): "Intimidations of empire: Predicaments of the tactile and unseen" and "Tense and tender ties: The politics of comparison in North American history and (post) colonial studies."

13 Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial rule* (reprinted 2010), preface.

I felt something similar reading Foucault, thinking what he was saying was already how I was approaching the archives but I could never have articulated it as he did. I was totally taken by this strangely familiar way with his style of thinking, his conceptual creations, his words.

That is how I read that book. It just made so much sense to me. How was it received?

I have never had books that were widely reviewed, but the responses were strong and shared a sense of excitement. It was new as a book, but its project was forecast much earlier, in Micaela di Leonardo's important volume *Gender at the crossroads of knowledge*,[14] under the initial title "Making empire respectable" in *American Ethnologist*,[15] in *Tensions of empire*,[16] then as the eponymous introduction to *Carnal knowledge*.[17] *Haunted by empire*[18] pushed intimacies of empire further and across a wider terrain. Starting as an invitation by the feminist historian Linda Gordon—a friend, colleague, and imposing force, someone I long admired—to the Organization of American History's 2000 meetings, it became a first essay in an American history journal in 2001.[19] The book emerged out of a workshop I had organized among a group of historians working on empire and gender, or histories of intimacy with no reference to American empire, and in an array of other combinations. Re-encountering their own work through "the intimacies of empire" seemed almost natural for some; others initially insisted that the subject was askew to their own work, and that those entangled relations would be hard to find. The process of rethinking for us all in agreement, and not, was as important as the published product.

In spring 2000, I was teaching a seminar in Berkeley's history department while preparing for the OAH [Organization of American Historians] conference. Invited to present the department, I thought it an opportunity to subject what I was suggesting about the intimacies of empire and a politics of comparison to an audience for whom gendered histories had only marginal salience. Queries after the talk were not veiled. We were in an embattled space—how could intimacy be important to American empire, they asked, if the US does not really have an empire? And how could you imagine the comparisons you make as viable?

What I thought was the most revelatory part of the project at the time, on the politics of comparison, was on the convergence, rather than the usual comparison, of proto-Apartheid debates in South Africa and the advice of US "experts" on eugenics and race. The complicity of US "experts" in the making of Apartheid at the time seemed revelatory, obvious, and astounding. The racial thread that tied concerns about poor white "girls" intimate with Black

14 Micaela di Leonardo (Ed.), *Gender at the crossroads of knowledge: Feminist anthropology in the postmodern era* (1991).
15 Ann Laura Stoler, Making empire respectable: The politics of race and sexual morality in 20th-century colonial cultures (1989).
16 Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Eds.), *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (1997).
17 Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial rule* (2002).
18 Ann Laura Stoler (Ed.), *Haunted by empire: Geographies of intimacy in North American history* (2006).
19 Ann Laura Stoler, Matters of intimacy as matters of state: A response (2001).

men in the 1930s warranted explicit segregationist policies in South Africa and the advice of US consultants, as described in detail in the Carnegie Commission on poor whites. US "experts" offered lots to learn.

That piece of the project, the politics of comparison—what gets compared, when, and by whom, why, and with what political prospects and agendas in mind—has been useful to think with, for me, my students, and others. It had no traction at Berkeley on that spring day I presented some of that project in the history department. To the contrary, it was the occasion to lose a relatively new young friend who, in earlier meetings, was profuse in saying how much he relied on my work.

Do you think you converted some of them?

Hardly.

In Duress*, you voice skepticism toward the way in which the study of sexuality is sometimes done in colonial research. You write that "at issue is the uneven distribution of specific, degradations and states of vulnerability. Not a sexual regime per se" (p. 313). I read this as a critique, that there is a danger of overemphasizing or even universalizing the role sexuality plays.*

Yes, I think that the focus on sexuality sometimes seems to overshadow the politics of sentiment and almost precludes it. It is not surprising that graduate students often look for a secure position in which to rest: Sometimes buzz words and concepts serve that function. Of course that is not true of everyone. Still, an undercurrent of strain turns students in specific directions. In anthropology, I find this turn away from history bizarre, given that the very issues and analytic heroes who guide them—whether it be STS [science and technology studies], attention to outer space, ecocide, or climate disaster—are so strangely absent from histories of the present that make sense of those moves today. Still, I think we should look more carefully at the politics of these moves: what they open up, from what some turn away.

The rush to "decoloniality," as it sucks the air out of historical work on what colonialism has been and what it is today, is hard to reckon with, especially when espoused by those who have never thought it necessary to know how colonialisms work, the strategies called upon, and the implications for us all.

After some four decades of learning about, unlearning, reading, living with those I once called "in the company's shadow"—that was the initial English and later Indonesian title of my first book, *Capitalism and confrontation in Sumatra's plantation belt*[20]—the declarations about "decoloniality" are almost shocking. Decoloniality and what is imagined as decolonial politics and practice have permeated the academic world. The usage demands no knowledge, no study of what colonialisms have looked like and what produces their resilient refractions now. I fear it offers a space and comfort, one devoted to affirming that one is on the right side of history. It seems to have become a place holder for the fictions of equality in democracies themselves. Obviously this contortion asks for more working on that collusion, what I have referred to

20 Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and confrontation in Sumatra's plantation belt, 1870–1979* (1985).

as "democracy's contract with inequality." It is a contract of a *longue durée*, one that De Tocqueville took almost as a given, despite his refrain of democracy having and promising an "equality of condition."

Your critique seems to refer to a superficial involvement with decolonial studies. But you would agree that much still needs to be done?

Obviously, the very subtitle of *Duress*, "Imperial durabilities in our times," should indicate that I am hardly rejecting that colonialisms unevenly permeate places and peoples across the globe. But those histories are not isomorphic, they are not aligned by a rote repetition.

According to you, then, what are the burning questions we have to turn to in regard to gender and sexuality?

I do not know if I can answer that. The terrain has changed in important ways—who is asking the questions, and defining the pressing ones, and addressing them in new ways. Saidiya Hartman's work has struck a chord that resonates for so many. Deep histories rethought, reimagined, pulling at the seams of what held the world together but not easily seen within the confines of what counted as history or proper. "Gender," as a concept and practice for so long confined to the academic corridors where battles over gender discrimination were lost and won, is taking on another valence today. Women's control over their own bodies was so racially skewed, it is hard to reckon how different it should be today. Abortion rights, as we know, are not only about women's bodies in general, they are about the denial of rights for women in conditions of poverty, conditions of femicide, conditions in which any kind of choice is not an option.

I am overwhelmed by the number of "burning questions" as you put it. I am in a moment of despair. I wish I had the foresight, courage, refusal of Noam Chomsky to rethink what commitments to justice can mean, already are being thought about differently. Is there an emergent "structure of feeling," as Raymond Williams once put it … a potential for thinking what a refusal to succumb to the "interior frontiers" might and can look like today?

I am bound to disappoint you: I cannot envision the question "in regard to gender and sexuality," though the backlash, as it was once called, is so blatant in so many domains. The increasing triumph of a far right occupying more and more of the globe that imagined itself too resilient to be subjected to its hold: In France, the Netherlands, the US there are a reanimation and pride in upholding the virtues of where men and women "really belong," and celebrating a woman giving birth to eight children to ward off the doom of a white minority. I see few graduate students deep inside the ways in which these spaces of depravity, privation, and confinement work. Did we as graduate students? No, there were issues to address that we knew mattered, studying from the bottom up, resisting the Vietnam War, pledging ourselves to a more just world. I fear they all sound—and were—hollow. But I still took my cues from those "urgencies" of the time—with pointed dissensions and conversions: anthropology in an historical mode, history not from the bottom up but of the perverse and pervasive history and logics of power, from the top down.

Did you deal with the "logics of power, from the top down" from the start? No, wait, your PhD was on resistance.

My dissertation gave me little satisfaction or pleasure. I actually saw it as a defeat. When it was finished, I collated it backwards so it could not be read. It took me years to realize that what I had been trying to do, and which was the very ground on which I was working in Sumatra, was somewhere between a journalist exposé and an effort to write a history of the present. That is what took me back to that ambiguity and fiction of colonial categories and the forms of racial dominance that depended on them.[21]

Was that a kind of liberation?

I never thought of it as liberation, but unsettling a certain way of knowing, a struggle to find a way of being responsible to what I actually thought about how relations of power worked when I really did not yet know how to say it. I did turn from thinking the only way I could be a good Marxist scholar was to study from the bottom up, as my heroes E. P. Thompson and so many others did. Questions took on other forms and vantage points, on the discomfort of asking how to understand oppression if you only focused on the oppressed. Could you really understand the duress of the displaced and dispossessed without staying close to the minutiae of degradations, the orchestrated humiliations of servitude, and how they worked?

I have often been asked how I "moved" from Marx to Foucault. It was not so much a move as a realignment, both fixed on the ways in which subsumption works. "Subsumption" is one of Marx's concepts whose complex implications join multiple forms of subordination, affective, physical, and lifelong, in so many ways. I see Marx and Foucault, though the latter never used it, looking at different domains to get at the subsuming and insurrectional forms in which we live.

There is one place where you do research on what could be called the subaltern. It is in the chapter in your Carnal knowledge *book where you do oral history with former servants in the colonial context of Dutch Indonesia.*

The last chapter with Karen Strassler, who was one of my most sterling graduate students, the following year to start her work on photography and history in Java. The entire project was plagued from the start, as the title "Casting for the colonial" was to indicate. A critique of ourselves, of the ready scripts we came with—good colonized, poor versus bad colonizer. We mocked ourselves for what we assumed was the case and what we could know. We sought those women who had worked as servants in Dutch colonial homes and hoped to collect the stories they would tell. But "stories" were already an imposition, we realized when we were in the midst of interviews, the meetings, the transcriptions, and frustrations from our—really my—casting of the colonial characters. We ended up making these *contournements* the subject

21 Ann Laura Stoler, Rethinking colonial categories: European communities and the boundaries of rule (1989).

of what we wrote and that was such a revealing irritant, we thought it really was not something to publish.[22]

In this chapter, you were talking to former cooks, nannies, and housekeepers. What impressed me was the strong contrast of their narratives with the nostalgic politics of memory in Dutch literature. But what I found even more unsettling was the way you keep thematizing your own expectations and shortcomings, reflecting on the fact that you did not meet the ultimate "other" or that the interviews did not help you find subaltern knowledges. What lesson can be learned from this engagement with your own charged desires?

You are right that it was about our own constricted vision and the limits of what you could really know—a critique of an entire field and, for me, of myself. In colonial studies, one always knows who the good and bad guys are in advance. Is anybody subaltern ever bad? Ever dislikeable and nasty? I wish I had disrupted that more.

For this, you had to disrupt your own expectations.

Yes, that is what it was all about. And the very field of colonial and postcolonial studies mapped people with assigned roles.

You were two researchers—could you discuss this process together, could you share your thoughts on what was going on?

That was the best part of it. We had arranged to visit an older Javanese woman who had worked in a Dutch home. She was different from many others we met, tremendously self-confident, almost statuesque. Greeting us in a perfunctory manner, almost rude in Java, it was clear that she was neither interested in nor eager for the interview. Her responses to our questions were short and almost abrupt. At one point, I asked her age. She said she was 70, and I, trying to find some way of connecting, said, "Oh, my mom is too." She looked at me and said, "I didn't know whites lived that long." It was more than a slap. It was a refusal to entertain what I did not quite realize was my game.

What did you do with that?

I did not know what to do with that. Karen and I and two Indonesian students who we were working with all went back to my room. I blurted out once the door was shut: "God, she is amazing! You know, we have got it now"—meaning someone not being polite, not going along, the sort of refusal that we, I had sought. Karen looks at me and says: "Annie! You've just created your subaltern hero all over again. Exactly what you were working against." I was mortified and immediately knew she was right—looking for the subaltern hero even as I knew I should not be and I could not. It is iconic of anthropologists in search of "the village's best storyteller."

22 Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, Memory-work in Java: A cautionary tale (2002).

Who will tell the story that the researcher already has in mind … ?

The event changed my course. I said to Karen, what happens when people do not have stories? Or is it that they do not choose to share them? We started noticing phrases, almost expletives, repetitions. One woman who had been a housekeeper talked about the clean Dutch homes and how nice they were and how much she cleaned it, and then her last sentence broke the rhythm: "I cleaned it until my knees were raw." Retired colonial couples in Amsterdam would show me pictures of them with the servants they so prized and adored. Not one former servant had a picture with a white family. Writing this really challenged us ethically, in so many ways, to make room for our preconceived notions and what we did not expect. So the casting of characters included us. The dilemma was to expose yourself but not make the writing about you.

You talk a bit about it in this chapter, of you being white in an ex-colonial setting and doing that research, and I was wondering how you dealt with that. You thought about power all your life and you find yourself in these situations where power plays out in so many disturbing ways.

Who wants to reduce themselves to a mild or harsh version of "liberal guilt?" I was contorted by the contradictions in what I was doing, thought to give up, succumb to the sham, or my inadequacy as a "real" ethnographer. When you hear how many people would return from their fieldwork, affirming that their informants, neighbors, or interlocutors loved them like daughters or brothers, you know there is a narrative there, a performative gesture for oneself. These are such charged, complex relationships, where both persons have to work through and around the ways in which they will deal with the enormous differences in social position, power, and wealth. Still, real friendships can develop, as can mutual care. We are guests nonetheless, and it is for us to know and to show what a privilege it is to be there. But that favorite self-congratulatory and assuring phrase, "I was totally accepted," is always a fiction, an evasion, and it is hard for it not to ring false.

It assumes an impossible mutuality.

For me, it had so many other dimensions. I always felt too big, too fat, too white and pink, ugly. I studied dance when I was growing up. But among Javanese, I felt clumsy. Walking along the narrow raised borders of the rice fields, I wanted to walk with their grace and not break the dirt edges. In jest and for real and with affection, I was *kasar*, a bit coarse, not finely sculpted in being and disposition; my partner Ben was *halus*, with a refined demeanor and movement, with smooth edges.

Did you consult with Javanese people on how you could deal with the inequalities and the power issues in your situation?

We would talk about it. They never asked me what I could do, though I asked myself. They would try to soothe me. "It is okay, *mbak*—elder sister—an endearing more informal term—Anni." I would say that I was writing about their conditions so that everyone would

know—but knew myself that lots of high officials did know and did not want to. I knew I was basically ineffectual. The stress was in my body and head; I got migraines. In Sumatra, my dear neighbor, Bu Aminah, would come over to massage my tight muscles and gnarled limbs. "Your body is just one big knot," she would say, laughing. Of course she was right. So was my head.

The tension had to do with the work you did, the situation you were in?

More, the work that I did not do, and thought I should be doing, or was not doing well enough. The listening was not good enough. The notes were not full enough. I did not go out enough. I "should have" relaxed, been more inviting. Instead I was taut and uncomfortable. I should have done more interviews, and I should have done none since I did not really believe that you learned anything that mattered from them. Anthropology's self-description as "deep hanging out," for some of us, is pure fantasy. I have never really known how to do so, as a mode of fieldwork or with friends at home. Maybe that is why I turned to archives.

When I listen to you, it is impressive to hear how your body was so involved in this.

Yes, I have a lot of kinetic energy. When I am writing well, I want to move physically. Sometimes I do jumping jacks. When I want to stop writing, I run up and down the stairs doing laundry. But in Sumatra and Java it manifested in other ways. I was terrified of offending by my very presence. When I returned to the village where I had lived almost 50 years earlier, I imagined—no, I was anxious and mortified by the possibility—that no one would remember me, or want to talk. Instead it turned into a dazzling and poignant several days sleeping on mats with the grandchildren who had heard my name, Mbah Annie, sitting with the son who was named after my partner Larry, born just a few weeks after we left. It is hard to compute how much I felt everything I did was off those decades ago. I have still not written about how inadequate and inept I felt.

Would you say that this kind of research is an impossible thing and that one should not do it? Or that one should do it as an impossible thing?

Do it as an impossible thing and figure it out. And it is there in that doing that some increments of doing better come together with knowing a bit more.

Was your experience of impossibility gendered?

Of course it was. I was a woman living in a house alone … there had been and was still a nest of scorpions somewhere under the dirt floor. I rode a motorcycle … I called on plantation managers on my own. I asked inappropriate questions … No, it was not okay but you make it so, worse and then maybe better, in increments of sharing not the work so much as a sense of care and worth.

Ann, is this your archive right here on the walls? [Turning to Ann's office with 50 steel boxes circling the room, with three deep shelves on each of the walls.]

Yes, this one is on Nietzsche and Foucault. This is on the uses and abuses of Foucault. This is full of notes and reading for *Race and the education of desire*. The ones for *Along the archival grain*[23] are the most, the letters, personal letters between Valck and his daughter. These are the ones that slay me again and again. The first time I read these, a father looking for ways to connect to his small daughter, thousands of miles away and who he would not see for seven years, I was hit by a recognition of a love lost before it was ever won. He did not know his daughter. He wanted to know the names of her dolls so he could ask about them by name. He told her of the small dog by his side. He corrected her French … colonialism was a fiasco, like Fanon writes of racism, a system that contorts and destroys everyone touched by it.

So this office is in some visceral and immediate way the constructed texture and hue of a space I sometimes hardly leave for days. Its order is illusory. I think I cannot work unless the pillows are where they should be, the desk is clear of carelessly strewn papers. But that is not really the case. Finding new folders to put them in, I forgot what they were once a part of as my own sense of where they now "fit" has changed.

These boxes are amazing.

I literally cannot work unless I imagine provisionally where they should be placed. I am not OCD, but obsessive about temporary order—order and disorder, the calm and chaotic, the energy in both.

It is beautiful. I like your archive.

I love it.

So how do you decide what is placed in these folders?

They have to move, sometimes in two places, two boxes. The seminars were building from the book I was writing, the book was transforming with the turns of the seminar. I start each chapter in a box, with notes, articles, parts of thoughts, quotes from things that stir or disturb me, both nourish something maybe new, something on the cusp, maybe a failed imaginary. I do it for addresses, for new seminars, for just about everything with which I am working. But I also get lost, as do the papers. Because there is often so much overlap in what I am doing over months and years, and they may be filed somewhere I cannot quite remember because I am using my notes on the reading in so many different places. The boxes are not foolproof in any way. But I do have 50 of them.

We have talked a lot about how you deal with the dynamics and the shifting and the breaks and contingencies. Maybe that archive is the counterpart that makes your work possible.

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23 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (2010).

A student, Lowan Lee, recently gave me a paper with George Perec's beautiful concept of "definitively temporary," *définitivement provisoire*, coursing through his essay. Perec offers a way of investing in, caring for, a particular analysis but not holding it too firmly and tight. Rather one can think of an explication or interpretation as a pause, a suspension, that turns to another configuration, "definitively temporary" again.

So you keep reordering the physical archive and the imaginary one.

Teaching only graduate seminars means that I can push the emergent, a seminar on "Grammars of time," try to hone what I have done before, "Histories of the present," or totally revamp what I have taught for over 20 years, "The politics of sentiment"—stretch to unfamiliar domains, new fields, new media, new places, and not least thoughtful challenges to what I had brought to seminar and found I needed to modify and sometimes to change. I usually teach one graduate seminar and then two the following semester. Seminars are an active, exuberant space to think about what Sartre wrote in *Les mots*, the emergence of a political being, and the passions of reading and writing.

That is great for the students as well, because they see you working and thinking in action.

And I love to see them processing too. It is a privilege to get to do both. I feel that privilege every day. My despair is that even with our progressive, radical pedagogic praxis, the world we are part of and confront is turning so blatantly conservative, anti-revolutionary, exclusionary, more blatantly racist and committed to inequities, ever more in how we so differently and disparately live and labor. The despair in part derives from disquiet that with all this knowledge we accumulate, it is increasingly clear that we still inadequately know how to annul the engines of horrific violences against our neighboring humans, animals, this earth and air we so inequitably share. I see that we should remain belligerently defiant and indignant, if inadequately so, to ward off utter despair.

Thank you, Ann, for sharing so much with me, and for this wonderful and rich conversation.

Patricia, it was really lovely! You know in some ways it was not an interview at all, but a conversation, in large part thanks to your thoughtful, engaging, and sometimes difficult questions.

The conversation took place in New York, USA, on March 22, 2022.

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