OF COMPANIONS, SLAVES, AND HANDMAIDENS: WOMEN AND THE ARCHIVE/S OF EMPIRE

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RESOURCE REVIEW

Book review of

Ghosh, D. (2006). *Sex and the family in colonial India: The making of empire*. Cambridge University Press., and

Fuentes, M. J. (2016). *Dispossessed lives: Enslaved women, violence, and the archive*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

The works of Durba Ghosh (2008) and Marisa Fuentes (2016) face the difficulty of creating accounts of women that barely left any records, if any, in the face of the jussive power and ambiguities of the Empire's inscriptions. This review looks at how both authors engaged archival fragments, processes, and scholars against and along the grain. In these books, the archives serve as the source, subject, and object of study in relation to the constitutive formation of gendered identities and the politics of empire. I situate these works within broader discussions of archives as technologies of Empire, as I explore how the authors point, contend, and subvert archival silence and violence.

Grain and Gender in Colonial Archive/s

Colonial archives are repositories built and maintained by the Empire to store records of territories under their colonial rule. Initially composed of government records, its primary function was administrative being a product of "archival centralization which accompanied and translated the bureaucratic ambitions of the Empire" (Delsalle & Procter, 2017, p. 136). These administrative records of official and legal value include various forms of correspondences, reports, maps, and other documents about the lives and events of both the Empire and its colonial subjects. These have expanded to include personal memoirs, artifacts, oral histories, and grey literature of and from both parties. They contain information regarding the transactions between and identities of the ruler and ruled, though in unequal terms, through what have been selectively inscribed and left behind, and how they have been created, organized, and provided access to. Thomas Richards (1993) speaks of the 'imperial archive,' echoing something thematically similar pertaining to the "fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire" (p. 6). Through literary lenses and emphasis, Richards attempts to try "to understand what it means to think the thought of imperial control" (p. 2).

Michelle Caswell (2016) warns of discussions of the figurative 'archive' and the material 'archives' across various disciplines that are "happening on parallel tracks in which scholars… are largely not taking part

in the same conversations, not speaking the same conceptual languages, and not benefiting from each other's insights " (p. 2). While many disciplines and scholarly works have made an 'archival turn,' the foundations and directions of such can be read as disparate or tangentially related at best. Such discontinuities can be seen in various historical engagements with both the colonial archive and the colonial archives. Tony Ballantyne's (2004) survey of literature on colonial archives in South Asia illustrate how "scholarship has jeopardized…faith in the archive as a transparent repository of knowledge about colonial India that simply needs to be extracted through the correct application of research methods" (p. 22).

Ann Laura Stoler (2002) argues that colonial archives, as the supreme technology of the Empire, are "both sites of the imaginary and institutions that fashioned histories" (p. 97) concealing, revealing, and reproducing power. In relation to this power, the anxieties and ambiguities of the Empire can also be seen in these spaces. Spaces which afford the senses and the affects through the abstract mechanisms of political rationalities. The archives are then seen not primarily as things, but as processes where the "restless realignments and readjustments of people and the beliefs to which they were tethered" (Stoler, 2009, p. 32) are revealed. For embedded in the archives are imperial dispositions and epistemic uncertainty and clarity. These necessitate that the archives be seen as source, subject, and object of study by not only utilizing and questioning its records but by also understanding the mechanisms and conditions surrounding them. Stoler ultimately calls that the colonial archives be read not only against but also along the grain.

Reading along the archival grain (Stoler, 2009) focuses on the form and conventions of the colonial archives – its logic of knowledge creation, regularities of affect, repetitions of voices and silences, and dynamics of mistakes and corrections. Reading against the grain is a tactic of inversion and recuperation that "resituates those who appeared as objects of colonial discipline as subaltern subjects and agents of practice who made choices of their own" (Stoler, 2002, p. 99). The affective dimensions of the Empire along the grain and the human agency of resistance and silence against the grain, need to be attended to as to seek the "pulse of the archive" in the "habits of the colonial heart" located at these intersections of bureaucratic regimes and personal lives (Stoler, 2009, p. 248).

Archives as technologies by and of contact with the Empire produce a variety of encounters in these intersections, which Antoinette Burton (2004) believes are primarily gendered. Though colonial women are difficult to find in archives, their traces "however ghostly, testify to their capacity to stand as subjects of History" (p. 290). Burton further points out that "what we learn about women and gender resonates well beyond the confines of the domestic and the private" (p. 290) as we recognize the constitutive relationship of gender and Empire. This appreciation of "how much the personal was political has revamped the scope of our archival frames" (Stoler, 2002, p. 100) acknowledging the tensions between the intimate and the broad.

It is within these contexts and trajectories that the works of Durba Ghosh (2008) and Marisa Fuentes (2016) are situated in and contribute to.

The Agency of the Companion

In *Sex and the family in colonial India: The making of empire* (2008), Ghosh explores the constitutive role of gender, sex, and race in the politics of the Empire as seen in the anxieties and negotiations brought about the inter-racial relationships between European men and native women during the British rule in India. Unravelling and weaving tensions between paternalism, bureaucracy, materiality, and domestic spaces, Ghosh, through meticulous presentation of case studies and narratives, ultimately accounts for how both men and their female colonial companions navigated and formed identities and families concurrently impacting and being impacted by the Empire grappling with racial, class, and gender ideologies.

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Examining a multitude of archival documents including wills, letters, baptism records, court proceedings, pension papers, novels, and paintings, Ghosh seeks and highlights both the silencing and agency of the Indian colonial woman companion amidst the constraints imposed by the Empire, specifically that of the East India Company. Ghosh illustrates that records practices specifically naming conventions of the colonial archive "charted the racial and gendered topographies" wherein "colonial subjects were recorded in archives only when necessary to mark out racial and social status" (p. 19). On the other hand, the wills left by native women "mapped their communities, maintained their familial ties, and reaffirmed their religious and linguistic practices" (p. 137) as to construct identities so that they be "remembered better in death than in life" (p. 109). The book presents that "women's subjectivity is possible" as we see that the native women "were not wholly absent, nor did they absent themselves from the records of early colonial communities" (p. 169), exercising "mobility within positions of relative powerlessness" (p. 16).

Ghosh reads along and against the archival grain presenting not only the agency of these colonial companions but also the racial anxieties of the empire brought about by the existence of mixed-race children and families within and beyond the archives. The differential treatment seen in the Empire's policies and practices towards racial purity and against the "threat of miscegenation" (p. 243) unravels in its 'archival conventions' (Stoler, 2002). Ghosh shows how the colonial state denied women's claims reinforcing patriarchal racial values in uneven and seemingly arbitrary ways. These conventions read by Ghosh were "built upon a changing collection of colonial truths" (Stoler, 2002, p. 103) unevenly enacted by imperial bureaucrats while being questioned and gamed by the female companions. These gaps as conventions read along the grain and the agency identified by going against the grain form Ghosh's painstaking and complex archival reading. She presents both narratives of subjugation by British power and of Indian agency. In its hybridity, it negotiates spaces and practices, visibility and invisibility, and materiality and affect.

The Imaginary of the Slave

Marisa Fuentes' *Dispossessed lives: Enslaved women, violence, and the archive* (2016) centers on women in slavery during the eighteenth century in Bridgetown, Barbados. Unlike Ghosh, Fuentes is faced with an extreme "mutilated historicity… brought about by the violent condition in which enslaved women appear in the archive disfigured and violated" (p. 16), if at all. Using archival fragments with the barest of information, Fuentes writes harrowing accounts of historical speculations exploring and lingering in the experiences of pain and suffering of the enslaved. In doing so, she critiques the formation and emancipates the limitations of the archives while transcending binary themes of agency and resistance in favor of "complex accounts… and articulations of humanity" (p. 142) in and through the deafening silence of the enslaved. The vignettes narrate not only themes of slavery between men and women, white and black, but also that of master-slave dialectics and hierarchies between women. In each vivid story, Fuentes underlines both the possibilities for liberation and the "structures of confinement and punishment" (p. 20) in the enslaved women's experiences and in the archives that reflect and enable them.

From fleeting printed advertisements to drafts of city plans, Fuentes fictionally reconstructs voices from archival fragments produced not by or for these forgotten women. She argues that "epistemic violence originates from the knowledge produced about enslaved women by white men and women… and that knowledge is what survives in archival form" (p. 5). The "machinations of archival power" (p. 1) is in full display in her book while she "productively mines archival silences and pausing at the corruptive nature of this material" (p. 5). Through such she explores relentless criminalization of the enslaved, the manifestation of white colonial power in physically built environments, and the morality of sexualities. Fuentes ultimately lays visible the "archival and physical violence" (p. 144) of the empire against racialized and gendered subjects that continue to be reproduced in these records and in the scholarship that emanates from them. Through her work, she shows and calls for the subversion of

discourses emanating from such archival conventions as a way to bring the dispossessed identities of these women both as beings in and beyond the archives.

Fuentes' compelling work—which is both emotionally exhausting and liberating—similar to that of Ghosh employs reading along and against the archival grain, albeit in a different way. She reads "along the bias grain" (p. 7) identifying absences and silences in archival conventions relating them to the violence brought upon enslaved women, and how they remained "a spectral influence on the lives of white and black men and women" (p. 78). Through such, the ways meaning were produced about the subject in their own time and in contemporary historical practices are better understood in their specific contexts and in continuity of each other (p. 2). This process of recovering history and reorienting methodologies is enabled by such a reading along the grain. But as Fuentes writes speculative narratives of agency, resistance, and escape she grounds them in her reading against the archival grain. Central to the voices she attempts to give bodies to is the "will to survive, the sound of somebody wanting to be heard, wanting to live or wanting to die," (p. 143) painfully hidden in a scar or heard through silence grappling against dehumanization through wanting. These acts of accounting and imagining, of persistence and wanting, Fuentes locates in her cross-directional reading of the archives despite and precisely because of their paucity and disfiguration.

Women and Their Names

Illustrating further this cross-directional reading of the archival grain both by Ghosh and Fuentes is the centrality of naming as a key archival convention. Names function as a mechanism of identification, categorization, and retrieval. Naming is an act acknowledgement of one's existence and an assertion of one's identity. To be given a name is both an act of inclusion signaling one's place and belonging, while also serving as an act of exclusion identifying one's uniqueness and othering.

In reading along the grain, Ghosh is able to highlight how naming practices "make subjects legible to the state for the purposes of governance" (p. 18), and so the absence, suppression, and erasure of names of native women in colonial archives can be read as an act of rendering them invisible given the threat they pose to the empire's whiteness. Understanding this convention—the lack of a name, the bracketing in quotes of a name, and the incompleteness of a name—signals the presence of a colonial companion and the "conflicting ways in which subjectivities of local women were simultaneously produced and made anonymous by common practices in record keeping" (p. 19). Though this understanding of naming practices may seem unintentional or even inconsequential, it enables the identification of existence and boundaries which serve as the foundation of Ghosh's critical arguments. By then reading against this convention Ghosh is able to illustrate how Indian women actively manipulated their identities through naming in order to navigate the colonial system. This top-down understanding of archival convention and the bottom-up identification of agency against it, is the strategic tension wielded by Ghosh in her work.

On the other hand, each of the five chapter titles of Fuentes' book utters the single name of an enslaved woman. The slave is not named in the convention of the archives as the slave is only known in relation to her master. But through this act of naming, Fuentes places them at the center of her narrative and gives them back their dispossessed lives. The names of these enslaved women become the figurative archive from which what can and ought to be said all emanate from. Jane is no longer known by the scar left by a knife on her neck or the fire brand on her breasts, but rather she is identified by her name and the freedom she sought. This act of naming as an act of going against the grain relates to Fuentes' reading along the grain of the seemingly disparate archival fragments she weaves together. In Jane's chapter, Fuentes puts together various maps, advertisements, correspondences, and state records from various sources across different temporal points to create a narrative while subverting "archival discourse that filters the past only through white male voices" (p. 15).

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As Ghosh and Fuentes illustrate, in reading along and against the archival grain, the name is shaped by its utterance, form, and context. Its incompleteness and absence, refiguration and assertion, seen along and against one's reading, establish the corpus of one's narrative and argument when the archival fragments are limited, defaced, and incongruent.

The works of both Fuentes and Ghosh echo archivist Verne Harris (2002) talking about engaging colonial archives in Africa saying that "it is best understood as a sliver of a sliver of a sliver of a window into process… it is a fragile thing, an enchanted thing, defined not by its connections to 'reality,' but by its open-ended layerings of construction and reconstruction…far from constituting the solid structure around which imagination can play, it is itself the stuff of imagination" (p. 84). Reading along and against the archival grain is indeed an act of imagination, both referential and subversive, but never fixed.

The Silence of the Handmaiden

Archivist and archival studies scholar Terry Cook (2006) wrote,

> *…until the 1980s, archivists were often described as 'the handmaidens of historians'… the phrase is astonishing for its servility and its gender connotations. Until recently, women remained largely invisible in social and historical memory, relegated as the silent and usually unrecognized supporters of male accomplishment; so too, archivists have remained invisible in the construction of social memory, their role also poorly articulated and rarely appreciated. I might go further to say that just as patriarchy required women to be subservient, invisible handmaidens to male power, historians and other users of archives require archivists to be neutral, invisible, silent handmaidens of historical research. (p. 170)*

Reading along and against the archival grain includes precisely the recognition and critique of the labor and influence of the archivist. And while archivists and archival studies scholar "have embraced their active- and political- role as shapers of history" (Caswell, 2016, p. 10), other disciplines that utilize their labor lag behind in recognizing the same. In the engagements and readings of Ghosh and Fuentes of the archives, it is of value to ask how their work would have been influenced seen through the additional frames of archival practice and theory. If we are to heed Stoler's call to explore archives not as extracted content turned object, but rather to turn to archives as process, does it not necessitate that the voice of the archivist be accounted for?

In Fuentes' assertion of the archival violence towards the enslaved, is there not an actual archivist enacting or possibly even hindering such. In her epilogue, she states that "archive and history have erased black bodies and… the legacies of slavery manifest in the violence we continue to confront" (p. 148). While she recognizes that archives are neither neutral or objective, her extraction of it in creating narratives and building arguments – similar to Ghosh – lacks the acknowledgment of both the changing agency, complicity, and resistance of the archival process during the time of the historical events they speak of all the way until its contemporary reckoning.

The archives then is not only the supreme technology of the Empire, but also a mechanism subjected by the Empire. Violence is directed to and stems from the archives, as the enslaved archives is used to subjugate others. Framing the archives in this way opens it up to possibilities of liberation by asserting the agency of the archivist and the imaginaries drawn from the archives.

Thus, reflexively, the works of Ghosh and Fuentes have implications as well towards archival ideas and practice. Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) states that the work of the postcolonial archivist "cannot be merely the collection of subaltern histories" (p. 152) but rather it calls for the investigation of the archives as a site of knowledge production. The agency of the colonial companion and the imaginary of the enslaved woman are vivid reminders for the handmaiden that should no longer remain silent.

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