

H-Net Reviews

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Ann Laura Stoler, ed. *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 384 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5348-5; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5361-4.

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Ann Laura Stoler has always given us important things to think about. First it was Michel Foucault's College de France lectures about the biopolitics of race in *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (1995). Then came several innovative works about the integral role of intimate relationships and sexuality in the formation and maintenance of colonial societies, culminating in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002). Her latest book, *Imperial Debris*, is no exception. What she and the nine other authors in this collection argue is that colonialism and imperialism, far from being processes that ended with twentieth-century decolonization, continue to have a powerfully negative impact on people in many (if not most) parts of the formerly colonized world.

At the heart of *Imperial Debris* is Stoler's lead essay, "The Rot Remains: From Ruins to Ruination," which is as much a manifesto as an academic call to arms. Surveying current writing in colonial studies, Stoler challenges colonial scholars to move beyond the theoretical and empirical limitations of postcolonial and subaltern studies. She asks them to embrace the fact that imperial processes fundamentally altered societies and psychologies in imperial places and that these altered states are still ongoing features of postcolonial societies in powerful and sometimes quirky ways.

Central to Stoler's thesis is the distinction between ruin and ruination. For her, ruins are the reified vestiges of imperial pasts, the leavings of empire. Tumble-down buildings, overgrown jungle towns, and deserted urban landscapes—all of these represent disentangled empires,

experiences safely isolated in the past. Visited by archeologists, art and architectural historians, and increasingly, tourists, ruins are remnants of the past and have seemingly no ongoing contact with or relevance for the present. This view—think of Machu Picchu, the Roman Coliseum, or even Colonial Williamsburg—locates empire in the comfortable past. But how past and comfortable is empire really? Not very, is Stoler's answer. How can we even imagine that the effects of a social, political, economic, and cultural formation as widespread and imposing as empire would simply pass away quietly, giving way to the better imperatives of the postcolonial present? This contemporary blindness, Stoler tells us, is not simply a matter of conservative and reactionary cultural politics, but infects current scholarship from postcolonial and subaltern practitioners—people who ought to know better.

Stoler seeks to redress this blindness to the continuing impact of empire and imperialism by focusing on the *process* of ruination. On the one hand, ruins are reified things—objects taken out of the flow of time and securely fastened in a static and "safe" past. Ruination, on the other hand, is active, processural, and alive in the present. It is this process of ruination that Stoler wants us to consider. It is well understood that empires rest on fear, violence, and exploitation, but Stoler urges us to probe further. Behind its seemingly fixed and inert presence, Stoler reminds us, ruin, too, is a "violent verb" (p. 7), and she asks us to include in our accounts the violence and exploitation created after empire ended and independence was declared. This is the unaddressed problem of colonialism and imperialism that *Imperial Debris* sets out to answer.

Ongoing ruination is “what people are left with” (p. 9), and Stoler’s list of leftovers is long: blocked livelihoods, poor health, altered and unusable landscapes, and distorted and ruined social and personal lives are some that stand out. What Stoler is talking about here is the long-term inertia of imperialism—the ruination that does not end with decolonization. This ruination appears in physical ruins but even more so in the mindscapes of people who inherited postimperial worlds. It is those who came after, those who live in the detritus of empire and colonialism on an ongoing basis, that Stoler and the nine writers whose essays make up the bulk of the book aim to uncover. Most of the essays are focused on contemporary ruination and the imperial trajectories that led to this present-day condition. Ranging widely from Congo to the Paraguayan Chaco, each essay is a more or less complex attempt to follow Stoler’s lead and to locate and reveal the ongoing process of ruination in postcolonial places.

The remaining nine essays are divided into three parts; the first part is entitled “Decompositions of Matter and Mind.” The opening essay, Nancy Rose Hunt’s “An Acoustic Register: Rape and Repetition in Congo,” asks us to attend to not only the audible record of sounds and utterances of women violated in sexual ways in Congo, but also the things unsaid in most text-oriented sources. There is more than irony, Hunt suggests, in the fact that many of the rapes and disfigurements of women taking place in twenty-first-century Democratic Republic of the Congo occurred at the same site as similar violence in the age of high imperialism a century before. For Congo women, the many horrors of the imperial past remain terrifyingly alive.

The next essay, “The Coolie: An Unfinished Epic,” by E. Valentine Daniel is an exploration of new ways to convey the thoughts and feelings of contract workers in imperial and postimperial Sri Lanka. Written as an epic poem instead of conventional academic prose, this innovative piece allows Daniel to capture the everyday lives and feelings of exploited and degraded workers—including members of her own family—and thus to trace the personal costs of postcolonial continuity.

Greg Grandin revisits Manaus and Fordlândia in his contribution, “Empire’s Ruins: Detroit to the Amazon,” which compares the twin sites of Henry Ford’s early twentieth-century misguided attempts to reform North and South American society as he expanded his automobile empire. Revisiting the site of his 2009 book, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle*

City, Grandin points to the continued presence of imperial disruptions and distortions in both Detroit and Amazonia, the most poignant being Manaus, a city of three million that, lacking a sewage treatment plant, simply dumps its raw sewage into nearby rivers.

The next section, “Living in Ruins: Degradations and Regenerations,” begins with Sharad Chari Hari’s “Detritus in Durban: Polluted Environs and the Biopolitics of Refusal.” Hari’s focus is on the refusal of some post-apartheid and postcolonial residents to take on the mindscapes of environmental activists and government officials who enter the ecologically plagued area of Durban to offer “instruction and help” in achieving “healthy living.” More than a simple refusal of middle-class programs, her oral interviews highlight the class- and race-based divisions that continue in postcolonial South Africa.

John Collins finds many similarities with Hari’s Durban in his “Ruins, Redemption, and Brazil’s Imperial Exception,” an exploration of what happened when Salvador, Brazil’s first colonial capital, became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1999. Like the “coloreds” of Durban, the poor residents of Salvador experienced this international and government recognition as both an unwelcome imposition and a return to colonial days, especially when they were forcibly relocated so that the remaining “ruins” of colonial Salvador—their homes at the time—could be bulldozed and reconstructed as an international tourist site.

Ariella Azoulay closes this section with her essay, “When a Demolished House Becomes a Public Square,” a compelling examination of the personal impact of Israeli intervention in Gaza. The opening photo of Israeli soldiers sleeping in a Palestinian home, the owners of which they have just forced out into the streets, sets the tone of her piece and vividly explains why Palestinians feel that they continue to live in imperial times.

The final set of essays, “Anticipating the Imperial Future,” begins with Gaston Gordillo’s “The Void: Invisible Ruins on the Edges of Empire.” Here Gordillo turns our attention to the Paraguayan Chaco, a region of swamps, impenetrable forest, and myriad small waterways where indigenous residents had forcibly kept armies, government officials, and missionaries from entering what came to be known as *The Void* from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. Reading Gordillo’s essay alongside James Schofield Saeger’s 2000 account, *The Chaco Mission Frontier: The Guaycuruan Experience*, one gains an appreciation not only of empire’s unending quest to claim,

map, and occupy physical space, but also of the many ways that indigenous people of the Chaco and elsewhere in the world's empires have contested these same imperial celebratory spaces.

Moving from Paraguay to Cold War-era United States, in "Engineering the Future as Nuclear Ruin," Joseph Hasco recounts the ways in which the United States built its Cold War response to Soviet (and later Chinese) communism by deploying an "emotional-management campaign" focused around the possibility of atomic destruction and the radioactive wasteland any survivors of nuclear war would endure. In school assemblies, Civil Defence propaganda pieces, TV dramas, and a series of ruination movies, the possibility of atomic destruction and the turning of American landmarks into ruins became an imperial genre of its own. Living through more than a half-century punctuated by scenarios of imperial atomic destruction, today's Americans, Hasco concludes, continue to live fearful lives in a "psychosocial space defined by the once and future promise of nuclear ruins" (p. 281).

Vjayanthi Rao has the final word in "The Future in Ruins." Turning our attention to the village of Jetprole in Andhra Pradesh, Rao reveals the human dynamics of postimperial dislocation, in this case a group of villagers who voluntarily "relocated" when the Indian state constructed a series of hydroelectric dams that transformed their village into a reservoir. What makes this experience unique, however, is that during the dry part of the year the water recedes, exposing the ruins of the old vil-

lage. Like Hari's account of contemporary Durban, Rao's story of ruination reveals a contrast between modern civic development imperatives and the popular reception of postimperial agendas. Public officials portrayed the enormous Sadar Sarovar hydroelectric project as a major step along a national path of modernization, but, much like the people of Durban, residents of Jetprole experienced few of the promised improvements to their lives. After more than thirty years of disruption and relocation, Rao notes, many residents felt isolated and imprisoned in a space that was neither their old village nor the rosy projections of the future proffered by state officials. Rather than leading to psychological and social disruption, however, the people of Jetprole instead began to return every year to their old village site during the dry months when the reservoir ran dry. There they planted a second peanut and millet crop that protected them from the continuous threat of starvation and, most remarkably, found, cleaned, and reconstructed their local temple. By cleaning and whitewashing the temple walls every dry season and continuing to plant much needed crops in their old fields, the people of Jetprole have recycled their old village lives, turning ruination into a means of economic and cultural survival.

Imperial Debris is an important book, not only for Stoler's guiding essay but also for the nine essays whose authors powerfully demonstrate both the salience of ruination as a concept and the continuing force of ruination in the postcolonial world. Once again, Stoler and her colleagues have given us much to think about.

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