

The Archive in Leopold von Ranke, Ranajit Guha, and Ann Laura Stoler: An Essay in Method¹

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This brief essay makes a comparative intervention into the nature and praxis of historiography as found in Leopold von Ranke, Ranajit Guha, and Ann Laura Stoler. As I address it, one can find significant continuities and departures within interrelated questions of the historian's objective in the archive and their engagement with archival material within the conceptual worlds of Ranke, Guha, and Stoler. By attending to the praxis of reading along and against the archival grain, the essay attempts to connect the theoretical positions of these thinkers and trace these transitions in historiographic practice.

Keywords: Archives, colonialism, historiography, Leopold von Ranke, Ranajit Guha, Ann Laura Stoler

Reading *along* and *against* the grain of an archival document

The concept of reading *along* and *against* the grain comes from the notion of texts as *textiles* into which facts, ideas, and ideological networks are woven together. Reading along the grain involves setting aside a predetermined set of assumptions and letting primary sources speak for themselves. Ann Laura Stoler (2008) asserts that colonial scholars who solely read against the grain by selecting and sieving information from the archives bring preconceived ideas to the documents, assuming that the “grand narratives of colonialism” already have been told.² While examining colonial archives as sites of “command” as well as “countermand,” Stoler makes the case that a careful reading of the archives along its grain contradicts this. Instead, these are the sites of contested knowledge, rumours turned into fact, shifting notions of governance and

¹ Based on an essay written for HS 861: *Advanced Course on Historiography* (Spring 2024) as part of my MA Research coursework.

² Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 50.

order, future imaginings, and sentiments.³ Stoler's idea of the archive further entails the notion of attending to the several force fields that occupy it, and, in this vein, addresses "the archive's granular rather than seamless texture."⁴ To arrive at a comprehensive picture of it, one can return to the practice of reading *along* the archival grain to avoid the risks of arriving at predetermined, foregone conclusions, for instance, oversimplifying the colonial narrative. Thus, the act of reading along the grain does not signify a "frictionless" practice but entails the possibility of attending to "both the sound and sense" of the archive and their "rival and reciprocal energies."⁵

On the other hand, reading *against* the archival grain entails a practice of attending to several gaps that a linear and uniform set of sources can pose. As a practice of "resistant reading" gaining currency with the revisionist feminist work of Judith Fetterley (1978), reading *against* the grain posits alternative perspectives that differ from apparent textual meanings, challenging and deconstructing the dominant position that the text appears to offer at its surface. An example of this can be Ranajit Guha's (1983) "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," where Guha describes the corpus of historical writings on peasant insurgency in colonial India through three types of discourse—primary, secondary, and tertiary—each differentiated from the other two by "the degree of its formal and/or acknowledged identification with an official point of view."⁶ A reading *against* the archival grain, therefore, aims to deconstruct dominant cultural biases within the text of the primary source itself. Thus, a reading that blends both these practices in a meaningful and balanced way, without excessively verging on their own inherent conceptual biases, can offer useful resources to understand and arrive at a broader apparatus of a specific moment in time.

The "archival turn" in Stoler

Both the practices of reading *along* and *against* the grain come with an import of close textual reading: the former having an openness to know from the

³ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 50.

⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," In *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 48.

archive - to “disrupt” the archive and not to “annex” it, in Arlette Farge’s phrase, while the latter attending to alternative ways of addressing an archival document to deconstruct its biases and its associated cultural politics.⁷ The archival turn in Stoler comes with its central focus on the “archive as subject” rather than the “archive as source.”⁸ Stoler develops this argument by addressing the archival primary source beyond a certain set of preconditioned assumptions: drawing one’s sensibilities to “the archive’s granular rather than seamless texture, to the rough surface that mottles its hue and shapes its form.”⁹ In her section on “Archival Conventions,” Stoler inserts an epigraph by Farge where one encounters the concept of the archive as “an adversary to fight.”¹⁰ Thus, a sense of surrendering to archival material without a set of foregone conclusions underwrites Stoler’s premise of the “archival turn”. What characterizes the turn in Stoler is also a focus on addressing the “frail conceit of the panoptic glare.”¹¹ The archival turn in Stoler attends to the facade of the “archive’s repetitions, formulae, and obviousness,” of the “fixed formats, empty phrases, and racial clichés” characterized by a “limpid prose and numbing dullness.”¹² Thus, in attempting to deconstruct the official gaze without being clouded by a set of pre-existing ideas, Stoler’s practice necessitates an ethnography of the archive itself by addressing the processes that go into making the archives rather than having the archive as a finished product by itself. By locating the ways in which sources are made, Stoler’s archival turn looks at how documents viewed by state officials are “not always produced by them,” and she uses the instance of the Dutch colonial “archives which were “both a corpus of statements and a depot of documents, both sites of the imaginary and institutions that fashioned histories as they concealed, revealed, and contradicted the investments of the state.”¹³ It is within these “constricted” ontologies of rule, Stoler argues, that understandings of outrage escape the “reasoned state.”¹⁴ By addressing the several voices that constitute

⁷ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), quoted in Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 23.

⁸ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

the archive, Stoler's conceptual turn overturns the dominant notion of the archive as a singular monolithic body of documents solely produced by the state and renders the definition of the archive more nuanced.

Comparing Ranke's approach to historical archives to those of Guha and Stoler

The approach to archives as found in Guha and Stoler have significant continuities and departures with each other and with that of Leopold von Ranke's nineteenth-century theorizations on historiographic practice. To move towards a comparative reading of these three practices requires a working definition of the archive that underwrites the work of the three scholars across time. The archive in Ranke, Guha and Stoler is unambiguously constituted by the primary sources that inform history writing. Assessing the Rankean notion of history writing, K R Eskildsen (2008) writes of the "heroization" of archival experience that it entails, and that post-Ranke, historians learned "to consider history as a history of documents" with "its preference for the written word."¹⁵ Eskildsen further cites an "1841 critical observer" from the left-Hegelian journal *Hallische Jahrbucher*, who "noted the formation of a Rankean school based upon archival research."¹⁶ He commented, "Only within [the archive], [Ranke] thinks one can find *thorough and secure knowledge*; only from these, one can learn the true and original interrelationship between the events and their ultimate causes."¹⁷ In Guha, the colonial archive is defined in a specific manner: the "primary sources," central to the "profession" of history, from which one can move towards subaltern historiography is constituted by "despatches, counter-insurgency operations, departmental minutes on measures to deal with a still active insurrection and reports of investigation into some of the more important cases of unrest."¹⁸ Further, in Stoler, the archive is treated as a "subject" in itself than a "source," that is, the archive is addressed as a living, textured and active entity in itself, rather than a monolithic repository which comes to life only with the historian's encounter. In this way, Stoler's archive is defined on slightly

¹⁵ Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn: Location and Evidence in Modern Historiography," *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no.3 (November 2008): 453.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Guha, "Counter-Insurgency," 2.

different terms than that of Jules Michelet, where the nineteenth-century French historian's "excitement" resided in "the fantasy that dust-covered archival boxes were a point of entry to actual French lives, the ghostly remains, of those whose traces were entombed in the archival sepulchre."¹⁹ In the conceptual worlds of these three works of Ranke, Guha and Stoler, one can find some continuities in the idea of objectivity of the historian in the archive. However, the question of engaging with archival material differs significantly in each of them. In Ranke's positivist-informed notion of history as a factual discipline cognate with the natural sciences, but also having a poetic import to it, the historian is nonetheless supposed to be without a subjective bias while attending to facts. There is a certain emphasis on truth, attributing a sense of causality to ultimate truth, and thus, cognate with the contemporary cultural impulse of the early nineteenth century that was underwritten by the intersections of religion and scientific developments. In *The Theory and Practice of History*, Ranke writes that a "documentary, penetrating, profound study" is necessary, devoted to the "phenomenon itself," then, "to its essence" and a "spiritual apperception."²⁰ This sheds light on the relationship between events that constitute primary sources. Guha and Stoler primarily share the idea of the interrelationships that shape events, archives and histories. In Guha, the peasant consciousness is embedded in the prose of the state records, at times strict bureaucratise, in a way that a reading *against* the grain sheds light on the several ways in which events are connected and shaped by each other. One can look at the two early letters from the 1831 Barasat uprising and the 1855 Santhal rebellion that he reads in his "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency": attending to the linguistic registers that speak of how urgent bureaucratise differs from a slow and sustained communication between officers. Further, in Stoler, the idea of the archive having a multiplicity of people's voices than the singular voice of the state apparatus resonates both with that of Ranke's argument of causality and Guha's notion of the indices of subaltern consciousness in elite discourse. Stoler writes of what goes into the making of the archive by looking at "archival asides": "lowly civil servants gone bankrupt in efforts to pay for their sons' requisite schooling in Holland," "abbreviated asides impoverished widows of lowly Dutch officials send[ing]

¹⁹ Francis X Blouin and William G Rosenberg, *Processing the Past* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.

²⁰ Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 39.

their servants to beg from their neighbours for food and funds on their behalf,” “Dutch administrators, as well as German and French planters scrambling to figure out whether their plantation holdings might be attacked by a few workers bent on revenge against an abusive planter, or by “phantasmic hoards of Islamic insurgents armed to storm their guarded gates.”²¹ The focus is thus again on the causality of events that surface in several ways in the archive.

However, one can trace certain departures here. In Ranke’s primary source-based notion of history writing, the question of interpretation is not acknowledged as prominently as an inquiry into human sciences would necessitate. Both in Guha and specifically Stoler, the question of the historian engaging with the material in the archive is taken up. Both scholars moreover use the notion of the archive as a sartorial entity within which the historian’s interpretive engagement unfolds. While Guha writes of having a “close look at its constituting elements and examines those cuts, seams and stitches—those cobbling marks—which tell us about the material it is made of and the manner of its absorption into the fabric of writing.” Stoler assesses the archives along the lines of reading *along* a grain.²² The focus is on what centrally constitutes the archival source and what is relegated to the margins of historical knowledge. A closer look at the work of the three scholars each having similarities and divergences from each other can give important frameworks not only to understand and write about archives but also to trace the changing practices of history writing and the theorizations that accompany them.

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²¹ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 21.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

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