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"Every Sentiment Has a History":  
Affect and the Archive  
An Interview with Ann Stoler

Interviewed by Erin Clancy and J.D. Saperstein

Ann Stoler is Willy Brandt Distinguished University Professor of Anthropology and Historical Studies at The New School for Social Research. She is the director of the Institute for Critical Social Inquiry. She has worked extensively on the politics of knowledge, colonial governance, racial epistemologies, the sexual politics of empire, and ethnography of the archives. Her books include *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (1995), *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002, 2010), and *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (2009).

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**Erin Clancy (EC):** Do you want to start more basic, and just ask what got you started in Academia? What was the impetus of that and the trajectory?

**Ann Stoler (Stoler):** Hmm just a little question.

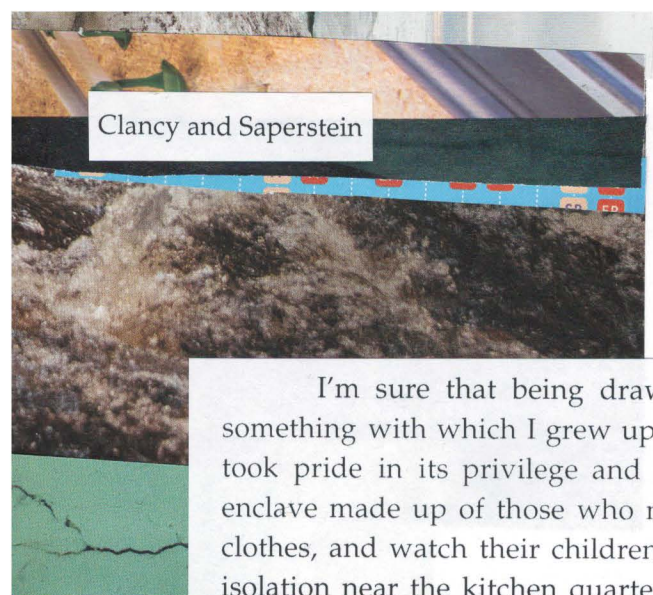
**EC:** Just a small one, just a warm-up question!

**Stoler:** I'm not sure it is terribly interesting: My sister, nine years older than I, was a Sanskritist with a passion for literature, poetry, and languages. She started teaching in "Oriental Studies" at Barnard the same year I began as a sophomore undergraduate. She was my measure of all things that mattered, my idol. Being an intellectual and getting my doctorate was my way (I thought) of escaping my fate in a category I despised: the smart but not brilliant, ordinary and ornery Jewish girl from a public school on the north shore of Long Island.

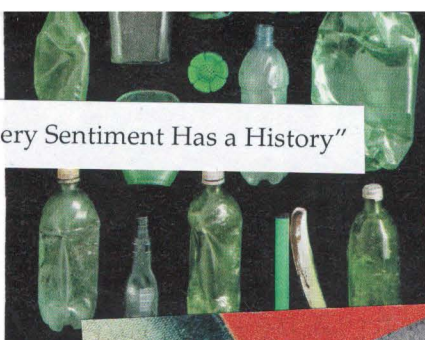
However much I wanted to be like her, that was not in the cards. The fact that we came of age in such radically different moments made all the difference. My generation was shaped by the Vietnam War, by how much we detested it, our kudos came from how well we knew Marx, to the number of times we were jailed. It meant that politics and intellectual work seemed organically to belong together and meshed. I had thought to do anthropology (or something like it) in Vietnam. It was far from possible but I did have an opportunity to go for the summer to Indonesia in 1972, at the height of its plunge into the Green Revolution only seven years after the massacre of alleged communist sympathizers across the archipelago. World Bank was eager to make Indonesia "safe for democracy" and promised to reach "the poorest of the poor." As a feisty marxist feminist in the making, I thought to do a summer project about landless women in Java. I put off graduate school and didn't come back to New York and start at Columbia for a year and a half.

For my dissertation research I had some under-formulated notion that I wanted to be in a place where the world capitalist system was playing out its contemporary course. I went to North Sumatra, to the heart of multinational agribusiness in Indonesia, what was once known as "The dollar land of Deli" – the plantation belt. Tobacco, rubber, and an expanding palm oil industry were represented by Goodyear, Uniroyal, Palmolive and in the late 19th century by some of the biggest traders on tobacco futures, cutting across the axis between Europe stock exchanges and North Sumatra's agroindustry. A politics of knowledge and a grossly skewed distribution of power were stamped into people's bodies, the architecture, the land. I suppose one could argue that some course of work was set then: an effort to understand the mechanisms of unequal distributions of privilege, resources, wealth.





Clancy and Saperstein

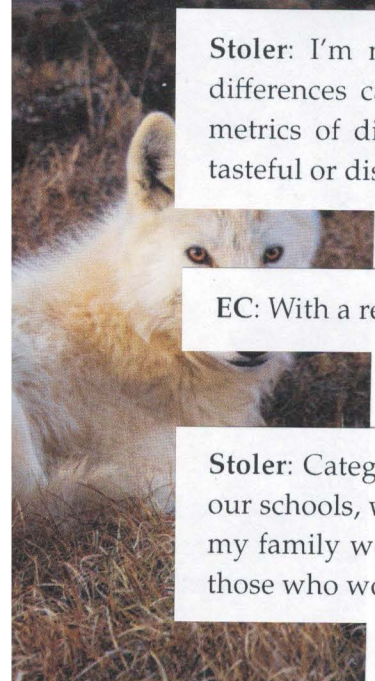


"Every Sentiment Has a History"

I'm sure that being drawn to an attentiveness about entitlement and privilege was something with which I grew up. The north shore of Long Island in the 1960s was a place that took pride in its privilege and ascendance to the upper middle class. It was a well-heeled enclave made up of those who made sure those who came to mow their lawns and iron their clothes, and watch their children did so from a measured distance, lived most of the week in isolation near the kitchen quarters of a house, or took buses back to Queens at the end of the day. I remember how ashamed I was, how awkward I found it, how "easy" and common it was.

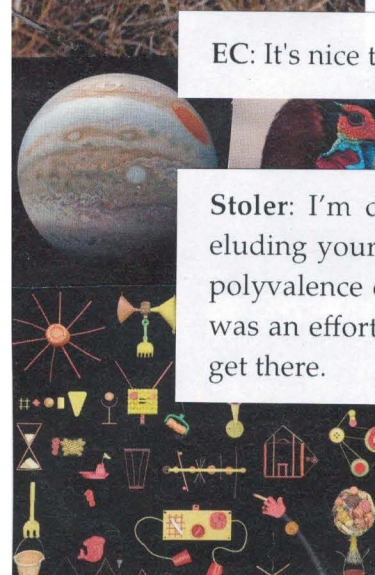


EC: Right.



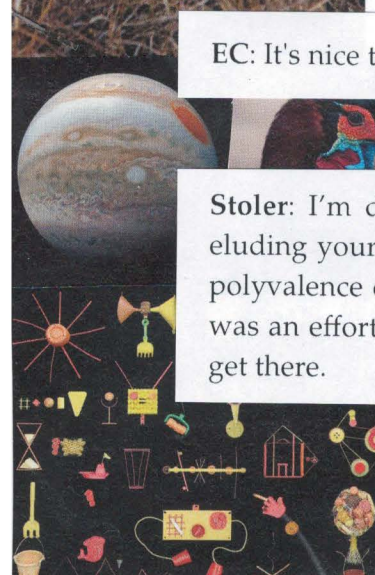
**Stoler:** I'm not sure I've ever gotten very far from the quotidian weight of distinctions, of differences carved in the uniforms for maids, or in the creased folds of a taffeta dress. The metrics of distinction and the crafting of race were all there in what we were taught to find tasteful or distasteful. These were the implicit lessons of the everyday.

EC: With a recursive orbit, almost back and forth.



**Stoler:** Categories of people and things, race was inscribed in that everyday – in who was not in our schools, where my father worked but did not play, where winter vacations took us, in places my family would not go. I'm ever more convinced that race was a subtext in my growing up – those who would be excluded and those places my parents feared I might be excluded from.

EC: It's nice to know that you don't let go of ideas to move on to something else.



**Stoler:** I'm drawn to working in and on situations that feel unyielding, with ready answers eluding your grasp. I think that's what attracted me to working so long on the ambiguities and polyvalence of race and to thinking with Foucault. We all like to quote his thought that his work was an effort "to think otherwise," to "*penser autrement*." I wanted to figure out another way to get there.



**EC:** That's actually one of our other questions. We were talking the other day about how there seemed to be a shift in your work, where you had been very interested in implementing Foucault and using his ideas in new ways, and then you suddenly switch to emotions and affect. So, maybe this ties back into this recursivity, but we were just curious more about the development of your theoretical lens?

**Stoler:** I don't see anything very sudden about it – understanding how power works has long pulled me in different directions – from Marx to Foucault to Marguerite Duras and back again through Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling" and again to Foucault. I've been writing about Foucault's treatment of affect and thinking about why sentiment remains so often the object of his work but not a dispositif in itself. In one of my favorite of Foucault's essays on genealogy it made the forceful claim that "every sentiment has a history" but never pursued that insight as one of his projects. I've long had the sense of a prior recognition in reading Foucault, something I know is shared by many others.

**J.D. Saperstein (JS):** That has been my experience reading Foucault as well.

**Stoler:** He does something that's so enabling and that you know is right, but you didn't really quite know how to say it, nor could you have the kind of confidence to do so. I started teaching Foucault's Genealogy essay<sup>1</sup> 20 years ago to help me think about how to treat the stories and histories that whites in the colonies told themselves about how they felt in the colonies, and how they should feel toward others and by what measure they ascribed sensibilities to the colonized – all of this so much a part of the imaginary real. My work has pushed between inscription, prescription, and ascription, how race is *inscribed* in the colonial archives, how ways of being are *prescribed* for Europeans and how they in turn *ascribed* features to others, those populations who they so often saw as a potential threat.

**JS:** With that, what potential do you see and imagine for the field when considering affect in studying post-colonialism?


**Stoler:** I think it will allow us to understand the multiplex metrics of inequality and the politics of degradations in more meaningful ways.

<sup>1</sup> Foucault, Michel (1977). "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." In *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice, Selected Interviews*, edited by D. F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.





Clancy and Saperstein



"Every Sentiment Has a History"

**JS:** You have a really good quotation from *Duress* that I'll read to you, if I can. "Colonial archives can impede the task: They have a way of drawing our attention to their own scripted temporal and spatial designations of what is colonial and what is no longer making it difficult to stretch beyond their guarded frames." So can you talk a bit more about how you've personally navigated the tendency of archives to tell a story already in the way that they're built?

**Stoler:** Archival labor is about confronting order as mess and what at first appears as arbitrary designations as the logic of an order. There are all kinds of ways in which the archive writes against itself as it's creating a kind of uniformity that can't be held. *Along the Archival Grain* was an effort to untangle obfuscations but also to stay with the tangled arts of governance, scripted through security regimes and segregated schools and in so many other ways. I think of what I'm after as writing history in a "minor key" – a history not of the crescendo of major chords but with lower case tonalities.

**EC:** Well, it's really interesting. Adjusting the multiscalar functions of imperialism. How anxiety from the body makes this proliferation of categories, which actually increases anxiety.

**Stoler:** Yes, And perhaps this proliferation makes those categories even more unstable.

**EC:** Okay. I'll just ask this question. So you mentioned quite a few other writers, how they inspire your work. What are some things that you're finding really excited to read right now?

**Stoler:** I read in the early hours at sunrise when I feel there is some sharpness to my attention, rarely late at night. I've been reading Kant's "Critique of Judgment" to think about taste and distaste with respect to race. Of course that's not what Kant was doing but I'm trying to understand how these concepts of taste and distaste (gout et degout) have been pulled apart. But to answer your original question: what's next to my bed right now – yes, Kant, and Foucault's first lectures from 1970 at the College de France on *La volonte du savoir* ( I love reading in French)... and some students papers I should have commented on a while ago!

**EC:** We have time for one more question, maybe.

**JS:** Do you want to do a plug for your Institute for Critical Social Inquiry?



127



**Stoler:** Well I could do a plug but you know we have so many applications I don't need to... still I'd love to talk about this exciting venture that emerged from a fantasy of my own. In our academic lives, as graduate students, assistant professors and more senior ones, there are always so many more thinkers to read and that we feel we need to read, more than we have time for or feel we can grasp on our own: it might be Levinas or Lacan, Hegel or Marx, Freud, Arendt, or Foucault... And each time you hear or see the name you think, "I've got to sit down and read this," feeling you should have already. So my thought was this: would it not be an amazing opportunity, after the semester of teaching is over, to sit with a small group of others for an intensive week and read and think with one of those thinkers – and do it with a "master" of sorts who has written on and thought with a Foucault or Marx for most of their careers?

A trustee from the New School shared my enthusiasm for the venture and provided the funds to start five years ago and we are going stronger than ever. Applicants hail from 40 to 50 different countries and the fellows we choose are a mix of advanced graduate students and full professor all there simply to learn, and learn more about what they have sought to know. It's an exhilarating and exhausting week each year and one in which fellows are always asking if they can come back again.

**EC:** An intellectual sprint and dive.

**Stoler:** Exactly. A sprint and dive.