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Book review: *Unearthing Traces. Dismantling Imperialist Entanglements of Archives, Landscapes and the Built Environment*

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For quite a while now, the so-called "archival turn" has changed the ways in which archives are seen, conceptualized and treated, especially in historical, cultural and art studies. It enables us to look at archives not as containers for historical sources but as agents situated in a web of power. Between a fashionable cry for change and a radical re-arrangement of established perspectives – the archival turn, like so many other buzzwords, is difficult to pin down. A recent publication reveals the productive and unsettling potential of this approach by linking it to coloniality. *Unearthing Traces. Dismantling Imperialist Entanglements of Archives, Landscapes and the Built Environment*, edited by Denise Bertschi, Julien Lafontaine Carboni and Nitin Bathla, emerges from a conference that took place in May 2021 online and in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Scholars from various fields such as urban studies, architecture, history, critical theory and art gathered with the aim of setting up a transdisciplinary conversation around archives and spatiality. The (beautifully designed) book that came out of this event is much more than documentation: it is an urgent invitation to conduct critical archival studies in the context of a post-imperial world.

In their insightful introduction, the editors sketch the aim and scope of their approach to archives. As we all know, archives are instrumental for ordering, classifying and storing knowledge. Beyond that, the archival turn enables us to look at archives as agents rather than as just a collection of sources. In the context of imperialism, archives are deeply complicit in the creation and maintenance of racialized power structures. They produce revisions of the past and create intelligible histories and suitable chronologies of imperialism and extractivist capitalism (p. 11). The other side of this process is the formation of gaps, silences and absences as well as the destruction, erasure and devaluation of knowledges, especially of indigenous, subaltern and alternative epistemes. The publication reveals these connections between archives and knowledge politics and calls for the need to create epistemic openings that allow us to question, unlearn and disengage with Eurocentric and imperial knowledge systems. It asks us to take up, value and engage with forms of knowledge that have been dismissed as irrational, pagan, particular, unscientific, ridiculous or premodern. This makes it possible to envisage decolonial practices of archiving that open up (to) different futures. Against this background, archives turn into agents for social, political and epistemic changes and are deeply related to the creation of "worlds yet to come" (p. 23). The various book contributions are arranged around the question of the postcolonial (part I); relations between architecture, coloniality and archives (part II); and critical fabulations and anti-imperial archival work (part III). In this review, I look more closely at three articles that deal with different archives: first, a classical one; second, material houses and their histories; and third, public spaces as archival sites.

In her contribution, Jasmine Benhaida reflects on the accessibility of archives and its relation to the creation of silences, especially in the digital age. The point of departure is her work on the social history of Jordan in the archives of the League of Nations in Geneva. Benhaida complicates the story of the clean and well-organized online archive that allows people from all over the world to access a wealth of sources fast, cheaply and efficiently. She asks how the dif-

ferent materialities of screens, keywords and registry numbers versus cardboard boxes and paper documents with their old, dried ink might change the research process. Or similarly she considers the interaction with archival staff in online or analogue situations. Since the process of choosing and un-choosing documents for the digital archive is largely invisibilized, it is almost impossible to come across accidental findings. "This could result in the reproduction, and thus solidification, of existing dialectics of mentions and silences: creating a cycle which is hard to break through with the digital tools at hand" (p. 65). Benhaida further makes apparent how digital archives are linked to institutional registration processes, enabling access to certain subjects and restricting it to others. She asks about the different distribution of the means to digitalize sources and whether digitalization leads to a shortening of research funds for archive trips. These reflections complicate the narrative of progress and democratization that are often tied up with digital archives. More importantly, the contribution shows that in the digital age, the hard work of dealing with gaps, silences and losses shifts in important ways but does not disappear at all.

A different approach to the stored presence of coloniality is taken up by Nagy Makhlouf's contribution on social housing in France. He argues for an investigation of how law and architecture are intertwined with the "French colonial continuum" (p. 97) by zooming in on a social housing project in the Parisian banlieue. The reconstruction of the housing development history uncovers how hierarchical boundaries between the white and the racialized migrant working class were established and kept, especially by way of creating a precarious and "transitory presence" (p. 98) for the latter. When, finally, foreigners were allowed into social housing projects in the late 1960s, cooperative housing was defunded. A neoliberal housing policy was set up instead, addressing the former tenants as individual homeowners and thus favoring again the French working and middle classes. The defunding practice led to overcrowding and reduced means for maintenance and cleaning. As a result, public authorities "conflated cause and effect of social problems encountered in grands ensembles and their architecture" (p. 101) and reacted with more police presence. From there, a line can be drawn to the present, where current urban development projects address a predominantly white and male "creative class", leading to further gentrification of the area. Makhlouf's critical analysis convincingly interweaves legal, social, economic and political aspects of an urban space in the French colonial continuum. And he inspires us to look at buildings and urban spaces as archives of their own, pointing out present as well as erased traces of their (and their inhabitants') complex stories. One wonders how his important insights could be developed further by looking at their gendered structures. Given the biopolitical impetus of the described policies, laws and practices, they are unquestionably intertwined with gender and sexuality. These are crucial connections that one would like to learn more about.

Colonial forms of gender become visible in Francoise Vergès' contributions. She introduces patriarchalization as a twin term to decolonization and describes their ongoing presence in current cityscapes. In her article, she shows how the monuments at the Porte Dorée in Paris not only reveal the uncanny presence of colonial reminders but also tie different colonial times together with the present. One of these monuments celebrates Jean-Baptiste Marchand's military Congo–Nile mission from 1896 to 1899. "The expedition across Africa involved forced labor, enslavement, rape, and looting. But Marchand came back a national hero" (p. 31). Marchand died in 1904, but the monument in his honor was inaugurated in 1949, when racism had been internationally condemned after World War 2 and the colonial struggle for national independence seemed to be unstoppable. Vergès reads the anachronistic history of this monument as a transition of colonial power into novel forms rather than as its sliding end. The monument is set up to celebrate colonial power in a moment of its collapse, which is connected to aggravated exercises of colonial violence, especially, in the case of the French imperium, in Algeria, Senegal, Madagascar and Vietnam. The story of the statue is further complicated by its bombing by the Caribbean Revolutionary Alliance in the 1980s. Monuments such as the Port Dorée show how the dense histories of colonial and patriarchal violence turn the public space into an imperial archive of its own. Vergès urges us not only to see but also to actively engage with it.

What that means is fleshed out further in the subsequent conversation, where Vergès calls France a "museum of power". She states that colonial monuments are protected by the current political elite because they are said to represent history. "But whose history?", asks Vergès. She makes clear that decolonial alternatives to the omnipresent celebration of imperial masculinities are yet to be invented: "Replacing statues of white men with women and black people is not, for me, a radical proposal. Why not replace them with trees? A tree and a bench for sitting on, reading, and listening to birds. And imagining other ways to inscribe struggles in the city" (p. 36). Even though this is a worthwhile suggestion, it does not do justice to some of the complex histories of monuments. In India, having statues of Ambedkar, erected initially in honor of him as co-author of India's constitution and as someone who shaped its democratic institutions, currently helps Dalit and other "lower-caste" people realize which village is anti-caste and therefore a safe space. In other words, statues can represent or take on meanings that are different from just glorifying heroes. Despite the contestability of some of these claims, Vergès convincingly calls for both a heightened sense of urgency for a decolonial transformation of the environment and a radical openness regarding the process of its implementation.

In their introduction, the editors situate the emergence of this book at the crossroads of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movements that shook the world in the early 2020s and are still haunting our present time. It is no

question that a few years later, while we are facing the rise of fascist regimes across the globe, brutal wars and an ongoing genocide in Palestine, the questions that this publication raises are more pressing than ever.