

ANN LAURA STOLER, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013), 365 pp.

Ruins are traditionally seen as the sublime remains of empires such as ancient Greece, Rome, or the Maya. This collection takes a slightly different look at ruins. Rather than emphasizing the romantic nostalgia evoked by sublimely framed edifices, the authors of this volume are interested in ruins as “petrified life,” as “traces that mark the fragility of power and the force of destruction.” They want to analyze ruins “as sites that condense alternative senses of history,” and they add to this the term “ruination” to describe the “on-going corrosive process” of imperial formations “that weighs on the future” (9). The term is inspired by Michelle Cliff’s use of it as referring to the process by which vegetation reconquers former human habitations in the (post) colonial climate of the Caribbean (19-20).

Stoler’s most recent edition, which follows upon collections that similarly subject the postcolonial world to critical ethnographic scrutiny (*Haunted by Empire; Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*), settles squarely between various vibrant critical fields such as the postcolonial study of the colonial past, critical heritage studies, and ecocriticism, to name the three most important ones. Written under the impact of the recent military ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the scandalous violations of human rights at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, the essays in this volume are dedicated to showing, as Stoler writes in her introduction, both “the enduring quality of imperial remains” and the status of these imperial leftovers as cultural heritage, but even more so to showing “what people are *left with*”: the “aftershocks of imperial assault” (9). How, she asks, “do imperial formations persist in their material debris, in ruined landscapes and through the social ruination of people’s lives?” (10). The nine essays which cover a geographical range from the Americas to India, the Congo, South Africa, and Palestine are headed by Stoler’s theoretically and politically incisive introduction in which she spells out the concerns of the volume: “to broach the protracted quality of decimation in people’s lives” and to document “the grossly uneven distribution of pollution, waste disposal, and biowaste among impoverished populations in the United States and worldwide” (11).

The perhaps most original critical work of this timely scholarly intervention consists in its disentanglement of the complicity of world heritage practices with what the authors call the “ruination” of human beings. While “colonialisms have been predicated on guarding natural and cultural patrimonies for populations assumed to need guidance in how to value and preserve them,” this book suggests nothing less than that the deep-felt attachment that many of us have for the monuments of past civilizations—for our heritage—is the emotional reservoir necessary for us to accept present-day despoliations around the globe as unavoidable collateral effects of globalization: as land-grabbing and forced relocations, health-hazardous resource extraction and waste disposal in the global south, and similar “imperial” corporate activities are thus quietly sanctioned by first world governments and populations. “Terrorists” from Al Quaida to ISIS have understood the cultural-ideological function of these monuments whose destruction they gleefully disseminate in the world wide web.

The book combines essays by ethnographers, historians, literary historians, and an independent artist. The latter, Nancy Rose Hunt, analyzes photographic representations of the “ruinated” bodies of violated and mutilated women in imperial Congo. The photos—today rarely seen “photographic debris”—were once effective in bringing about the demise of the Belgian regime in Congo by causing public revulsion in Britain, the U.S. and Europe. Similarly concerned with ruined lives, Sharad Chari presents a community in Wentworth, Durban, South Africa, that virtually lives in ruins. He traces the history of this community as a history of state racism and environmental pollution. With a view to the entanglement of heritage culture and colonial disenfranchisement, Vyjayanthi Rao writes about how the South Indian village of Jetpore, which had been submerged by the Srisailam megadam, is “archaeologically manufactured” into a sublime ruin while its former inhabitants were forced to leave their homes and give up their lifestyles.

The volume pays particular attention to processes of ruination in Latin America. Gastón Gordillo, inspired by various theories of the void, takes us into the colonial past of Argentina in telling us how the Spanish empire disremembered some of its first settlements which fell victim to destruction by indigenous

attacks or earthquakes. John Collins discusses the process by which Brazil's first capital, Pelourinho, has been turned into a museal site to receive UNESCO status while its population (as recently in Rio to make room for the soccer world cup) has been evicted from their homes—how the empire constructs its past by aligning it with UNESCO standards while it subjects its population to biopolitical violence. Ariella Azoulay tells a similar story of mass evictions and biopolitical policing, this time in Palestine where evictions and the mass-demolition of Palestinians' houses by the Israeli army are the order of the day.

Two of the essays are directly pertinent to the United States—Greg Grandin's exploration of the relationship between capitalism, empire, and decay illustrated by a critical analysis of Fordism at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Joseph Masco's detailed analysis of how cold war visual culture helped in interpellating U.S. citizens as inhabitants of a nuclear security state—a cultural trick whose ramifications can be felt until today. Grandin reminds us that Ford, while promoting high wages as the precondition of a thriving economy, was also one of the first industrial leaders to open up large-scale production sites outside of the U.S. where the wages were probably a little less high than at home. Today, his utopian industrial production center Fordlandia, near Manaus in the Amazon, is a ruin which looks not unlike the ruins of inner city Detroit (U.S.). Ford's paternalistic system, Grandin suggests, worked as long as all segments of car production stayed in one hand and only started to fail when industrial production became fragmented. Unlike the book from which it is pulled, Grandin's short essay says little about the cultural aspect of Ford's Amazonian utopia and how Fordlandia can be seen in a line with other early capitalist attempts to create little America in various parts of Latin America.

In the second US-related essay, Joseph Masco shows how the domestic U.S. population was systematically prepared for an atomic strike in the Cold War era and how nuclear power, reduced to a series of televised spectacles such as Operation Cue (Nevada, 1955) was both aestheticized and belittled in the process. While fantasies of urban ruination are crucial to these products and left their traces in later Hollywood movies such as *The Day After* (1983) and *Deep Impact* (1998),

Masco unfortunately stays within the logic of the texts he describes and says next to nothing about the imperial dimension of the actual nuclear strategy of the U.S., from the 1940s bombing of Pacific islands to turning a large part of Nevada into a permanent test site and nuclear waste disposal. The gap is mended in Stoler's own introduction, however, where both scenes of U.S. radioactive colonialism (Churchill/La Duke; Kuletz) are discussed (13, 22, 24). In both cases, indigenous non-Americans and the environments in which they lived have been deeply affected (in fact the gigantic concrete lid on the Bikini atoll underneath which the radioactive debris is being stored is beginning to crack). In viewing his theme primarily from the contemporary problem of the U.S. government discursively producing popular assent, to the violation of constitutional rights by fear of terror, Masco merely relates the domestic part of a gigantic history of ruination whose fatal effects literally radiate around the globe. Indigenous peoples are among its first victims.

The volume also includes a poetic contribution—Valentine Daniel's ethnographic poem "The Coolie." In creatively combining archival work with oral history, Daniel seeks to reconstruct the history of Tamil coolies whose labor force was exploited by the colonial rubber, tea, and coffee industries. In doing so, she takes advantage of new methodological possibilities developed within ethnography in the past decades.

Critical, theoretically sophisticated, and full of fascinating scholarship, the volume wants to "sound an alarm." It wants to enable us to "delineate the specific ways in which peoples and places are laid to waste, where debris falls, around whose lives it accumulates, and what constitutes 'the rot that remains.'" It wants us to "track the tangibilities of empire as effective histories of the present" (29)—not to settle scores with the past but rather to focus the historically-inspired lens on the subtle transformations, deformations, and mutations of a waste-producing imperial energy as well as on the resourcefulness and resilience of those who resist its deadly grip. This is a weighty and important volume not easy to stomach which will leave its trace in American Studies, postcolonial studies, heritage studies, and the ecological humanities.

Rostock

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