

## What is it an Archive of? Making Sense of Lively Ruins of Mumbai Mills

Review by Natalia Kovalyova

Finkelstein, Maura. “The Archive of Loss: Lively Ruination in the Mill Land Mumbai.” Duke University Press. 2019.

How does one live in a place that refuses to recognize one’s existence? This question motivates cultural anthropologist Maura Finkelstein’s ethnographic work in Mumbai whose textile mills were once central for the city’s industrial profile. That industry has long fallen into disregard and all but disappeared except for a few tenacious “pockets of productivity” (p.4), *un-recognized* by the city’s authorities who consider the mill land history. But the stories that a shrinking cohort of mill workers share with the author come in sharp contrast with the official narrative and its verdict of “loss and absence” (p. 4) placed on the case of mills. Organizing those vernacular stories into five “archives,” as she prefers to call them — of the mill, of the worker, of the chawl (tenements), of the great textile strike, and, finally, of industrial fire — the author sets out to demonstrate how her informants “experience infrastructure and ruination” (p. 22). The resulting book *The Archive of Loss: Lively Ruination in the Mill Land Mumbai* uses the trope of an archive to refer to a repository of very special records: embodied in the workers on the factory floor, who live their past “inside out,” configuring the present and paradoxically rarely glancing into the future (p. 24).

Chapter One presents the “archive” of the mill land and shows its vitality in the face of encroaching non-residential development. A decade into her fieldwork in Central Mumbai, Finkelstein finds some mills still in operation and workers continuing to forge a semblance of a “normal” life as they go for chai, cook meals, visit friends, and, of course, come to work. Chapter Two looks into the “archive” of the worker and focuses on feelings and psychical sensations of human bodies that serve the bodies of steel (that is, the machines). Chapter Three takes the reader to the workers’ tenements and into the “archive”

of the chawl. There, the cycle of poverty appears the hardest to break since the home life sets the horizon of expectations so low as to block people's imagination of a better or even different life and compels them to keep the future at bay. Chapter Four probes into an important historical event in the mill land, namely, the great strike of 1982-1983. However, one would search *The Archive of Loss* in vain for the stories of brave rebels rising against their oppressors. What surfaces instead are ethnic tensions and persistent xenophobia towards migrant workers from the North that seem to have been driving the strike and enabling the majority to pose as vulnerable victims. Finally, Chapter Five addresses a series of mysterious fires that consumed the city mills with an envious regularity. Yet, when cast against the cinematic portrayals of industrial fires and their messages of the inevitable and triumphant advent of capitalism, the mills of Mumbai beg to differ. They are hardly profitable anymore and barely manage to pay their workers. Therefore, their repeated incineration is unlikely to have served anyone's financial purpose. Instead, notes the author, those fires stand out as "a spectacle, a ritual, a movement of absolute transformation," much like a funeral pyre does (p. 157). And, most importantly, spinning stories —rumors, rather — about the fires allows the workers to claim the limelight, so to speak, in which to derive new meanings and to speculate about looming possibilities.

Exploring the ruins and chasing what she "cannot see" (p.18) as she rehabilitates the un-recognized, the author inevitably side-steps many hard issues, such as caste, post-colony, or globalization whose stamp on the city is unmistakable. Also, conspicuously missing from the account are the mills' owners even as their behind-the-scene activities ensure that the mills are not razed in the developmental rush, new machinery is occasionally delivered to the premises, and contracts with new trading partners are sought out in order to keep the mills afloat. It is quite possible that the owners and the mills' management mitigate between the official narrative of the defunct industry and the still productive ruins or that they contribute to reconciliation of their apparent contradiction. Yet, we do not get to hear their side of the story.

Moreover, having heard the voices excavated across the five archives, the reader familiar with the archival enterprise would wonder about the ontology on which those alternative archives are built and how their terms could be deployed for claiming new knowledge and, with it, new power — the core products of all archives as described by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Ann Laura Stoler, Terry Cook, and other sociologists, anthropologists, cultural critics, and archivists. Having selected the archival

analytics, it is imperative to demonstrate how (or whether) the five archives assist the mill workers in becoming more “resilient, persistent, and visible” (Stoler, 2013, p. 5). Yet, the question of power is inadvertently skirted in the mill land accounts, an omission particularly striking since the opening pages of the book report the haunting presence of the British Raj in the official narrative. If nothing at the mills count as a colonial legacy — and the stories from various “archives” do not mention the colonial past, it is important to ask how they escaped the marks of an imperial project or, mostly likely, how the imperial “tangibles” managed to “fade out of focus” (Miller 2005 cited in Stoler, 2013, p. 5).

Tackling the question of power, of the structure of domination in post-colony, and of the lives lived among the imperial debris makes *The Archive of Loss* an engaging reading for those willing to advance the project started by Maura Finkelstein and to approach ethnographically both the official records and the alternative archives. Students of other places, cultures, and societies that claim the label of “post-industrial” will find the book useful when searching the ways to document “post-industry” in its daunting hybridity. Finally, to scholars of empires and their aftermaths, the book offers a detailed description of decay and ruination as a prolonged process that follows its own logic and unfolds according to its own rules, supporting a ghostly presence of the past that refuses to die down.

#### Reference

Stoler, A.L. 2013. Introduction: “The rot remains: From ruins to ruination.” In A.L. Stoler (Ed.), *Imperial debris: On ruins and ruination* (pp. 1-35). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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