

Ann Laura Stoler

Interviewed by E. Valentine Daniel

E. Valentine Daniel (VD): Among the things I find most intriguing in your work, with the exception of your first book [*Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870–1979*], are the poetic titles of your books, and even of your essays: *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, “Habits of a Colonial Heart.” Each one entices like a promissory note pledging to share with the reader a work of passionate intelligence. What part do your titles play in the crafting of a book or a paper?

Ann Laura Stoler (AS): Thank you for even noticing how much titles matter to me, Val. A title is not an affirmation of what is but of what I want something to be. It's not the description of a *fait accompli*. Sometimes it's closer to a sensibility, a hand stretched to a reader. The hope is that the content and form will measure up. Sometimes the figurative, the political project, and the prosaic converge. Titles are challenges to myself, visions I hope to share of things I may fail to attain. A title is part critique, part conversation. *Race and the Education of Desire* was part comment on Antonio Gramsci's definition of state projects as the “education of consent.” *Along the Archival Grain* was a response to Walter Benjamin and to literalist readings of his pressing call to read history “against the grain.” *Capitalism and Confrontation* was Yale's unfortunate substitution for what I titled “In the Company's Shadow: The Politics of Labor Control in North Sumatra,” an allusion to living under the pale of the plantations, within a horizon blotted by interminable rows of rubber trees, and to being “subsumed,” as Karl Marx might have put it, by an estate economy. That shadow was cast wherever you turned—in squatter villages, prostitute encampments on estate peripheries, or high-priced stores on plantation grounds.



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VD: In the Sumatra book, Marx, broadly conceived, seemed to be your guiding light. And yet there is a parting of ways: Marx was a teleologist; you turned out otherwise. Marx's narratives unfolded in a certain direction, from diagnosis to redemption. In your book there is rather "an order (or disorder) of things." Was this a conscious choice to write the book in this manner or something you were compelled to do by the realities that confronted you in the field?

AS: I was drawn to North Sumatra as a modern vortex of high-gear capitalism but was struck by a topography of relations, things, practices, and vocabularies that seemed colonial through and through. I had expected some version of Java's intensive rice-growing villages, with people doing estate wage work as a way of getting by. I seized on Sidney Mintz's term "a reconstituted peasantry" at the tail end of writing the dissertation. But as it turns out, that is precisely what they were not.

A document in the Dutch colonial archives on labor policy stopped me short because it seemed to capture, better than anything else I had seen or read, something ambiguous and strategic at play. It was a term used in the 1920s by a Dutch official describing his vision and strategy for recruiting Javanese to the plantations and keeping them there—it was, as he put it, to create a "semblance" of peasant village life for these workers, not the actual possibility of living off their own land or maintaining those relationships that could really be independent and beyond "the shadow" of the estates.

VD: Are you saying that you saw in this colonial vision signs of an unsettling order of things?

AS: Yes. And I tried to understand what it took to render those conditions as "chosen" rather than enforced.

VD: So the "strategic ambiguities" you witnessed in Sumatra in the 1980s were the colonial vestiges of the unresolved paradox of "enforced choices." It is no wonder then that if one were to have read that book with teleological expectations—as some did—one is bound to be disappointed.

AS: In the end, the book is a peculiar take on the "contemporary" because it spends so much more time folding back on the "making" rather than the "being" of those persons and that place. As I had done four years earlier in Java, I counted everything I could get my hands on. Not only did these "facts" not mesh with

people's lives; they seemed superfluous, because much of what was happening, on and around the edges of the estates, had to do with precisely what could not be counted, with what was made uncountable: people gleaning and feeding off of what they saw as their due from the plantations. Suharto's military backers were raking in profits from private estates officially owned by others, often with Chinese names. It was a system, from top to bottom, that thrived on what was off the books—what couldn't and wouldn't be counted.

VD: So was the planters' own lived-in world off script as well?

AS: I began by assuming a strategically reasoned system. The more I understood how much planters' fears motivated their actions, the less convinced I became. The spring before I started teaching at Michigan [in 1989], Nicholas (Dirks) had asked me to respond to Michael Taussig's essay "Culture of Terror—Space of Death: Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture" for a workshop on colonialism and culture. I never published the text, but its query stayed with me: how does one understand the vastly different effects that fear and the threat of violence create? You have to be able to account for the range of intensities of terror produced—the difference among killing an elephant, threatening a worker, mutilating a family, and massacring a population. These were the interpellating spaces I sought to describe.

Planters' annual reports from the 1920s and 1930s referred to something that didn't "fit" with what I thought I knew: a "white proletariat" threatening the planter association with "chantage." Blackmail? A white proletariat? How poorly were they positioned to be considered an oppositional class? Colonial history had rarely veered far from pat and predictable plots. There were the (bad) colonizers and the (good) colonized. Or vice versa. I spent much of the next twenty years attending to what made those categories self-evident, to how they worked. Did fear of a white proletariat express an actual threat or the precarity of a system not confident in itself? I started by focusing on what colonial authorities saw as the worrisome edges of a racialized system, only to find that as much concerted work occurred at its center, trying to render "white" and "European" readily available to common sense.

VD: This puts that work in an entirely different light. If your subsequent writings reflexively tell us anything about this first book, it is that it represents a moment of discovery, on the one hand, and the beginning of a struggle, on the other, to achieve a new style of writing, a new vocabulary, a new language even, adequate

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to that discovery of the indeterminacy and fluidity of the colonial encounter where the kaleidoscope of race and class began to turn.

AS: I wanted to write differently, work differently, without the dread that had accompanied earlier efforts. It was then that I began thinking about categories in ways that I had not before. I often think that I wasn't ever really trained as an anthropologist or rather that what adhered was less anthropology than the conceptual tools that feminist thinking, Michel Foucault, and Marx offered. Our grad-student reading groups were devoted to Marx and Louis Althusser, [to the] British social history of E. P. Thompson, Douglas Hay, Eric Hobsbawm. Nicos Poulantzas and A. V. Chayanov seemed far more relevant than E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, or Victor Turner. It was only years later [that] I read those people I had missed (and dismissed).

VD: Foucault's work sounds like you just walked in and you found it was already always there.

AS: However self-deluded, that's how I felt. It was the most organic move I'd ever made. I recognized something uncannily familiar when I first began reading Foucault, which I never did reading ethnography; a sense of recognition, uncontrollable excitement. His attentiveness to concept formation and categories, to discursive relations that produce their objects, to a sentiment's history, and not least to sexuality as a nodal point of power—these spoke to what I was historically in the midst of deciphering. Binaries had little purchase in that effort. Thinking with Foucault offered ways to acknowledge the force and limits of colonial taxonomies. I saw his strategies not as incompatible with but rather as a complement to Marx, a methodological invitation to identify how deeply a calibrated history and hierarchy of distinctions affected whose bodies would be made available for what, where, and when. I had to defend my fascination with him in 1980 when feminist friends in Britain questioned how I could turn to Foucault.

VD: Why? Was it construed as a betrayal of Marx?

AS: Perhaps, to a feminist political economy at the time more narrowly defined. It may seem odd, but I saw Marx and Foucault both attempting to understand the occluded forms in which power is distributed and subjection works. I saw the politics and history of affect as critical to both stories. One of the first things I wrote, and never published, on the subject was in 1990, an essay on "thinking

through sentiment in political economy.” It morphed into a piece on “appropriate” sentiment as a marker of race, but both pieces were efforts to reflect on what constituted “the political” and the affective mechanisms through which inequalities of rank, race, class, and gender slipped into common sense.

VD: You make the point of the hideboundness of sentiments and intelligibility effectively throughout your writings.

AS: Racial coding ducks reproach when cast in affective terms. In the late nineteenth-century Indies, to be granted the status of European equivalence depended on showing that one felt *te huis* (at home) in a European milieu. But who’s to judge? By what criteria? What provides reasonable proof? Is a good performance adequate? Sensibilities and sentiments were consequential markers in racial grammars. “Affective proof” as a measure of one’s suitability for European status, citizenship, or legal rights has not gone away. The question is no longer how a distribution of ascribed sentiments managed colonial inequalities but rather how such distributions continue to serve as racialized shorthands today.

VD: You are the first anthropologist-historian who has carried over many of Foucault’s salient ideas, in the case of *Race and the Education of Desire*, into an entire work. It’s not just referenced here and there. He pervades the critique, accompanies you throughout the book. Why has he continued to be such an enduring presence?

AS: Someone once told me that *Race and the Education of Desire* reads as an extended conversation with Foucault. It’s flattering to think so. I initially came to Foucault thinking about sexuality and colonial rule, but what returns me to him is how he posed questions, thought about events, and imagined how to write differential histories in new ways—in short, the methodological pull he has on how I work. Sexuality as a transfer point of *racial* power placed the political emphasis where I thought it belonged. Neither psychoanalysis nor what I thought of as the ejaculation model of sex made as much sense.

Being in Sumatra and later steeped in the historical documents prompted by feminist politics led me to ask why these early multinationals cared how many women laborers were there, who was sleeping with whom, what young white supervisors did on their days off, and why a restriction on marriage to European women was enforced. Familial arrangements and sexual relations were reevaluated with virtually every change in plantation social and labor “reform.” That’s

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what turned me back to trace more carefully and broadly why and how (what I later called) “zones of the intimate” were at the core of imperial governance, its “marrow.” We now recognize these as key sites where conceptualized racial differences were made into facts on the ground. Contemporary students of colonial history have collectively produced a new archive of these articulations, of which just twenty-five years ago one could have imagined barely a trace.

VD: Whatever happened to the European plantation elite?

AS: In fact, I turned to the European community because it had been so artificially rendered off ethnographic limits. I sought to identify the strain of its self-imposed conventions. I interviewed numbers of ex-planters in the Netherlands. But by the time I arrived in Sumatra (the plantations were nationalized in the late 1950s), they had long been sacked. Those I later met in towns outside of Amsterdam and in The Hague’s suburbs were often sad figures with batik wall hangings and jars of hot *sambal* [a chili-based condiment] on their kitchen tables in small garden apartments cluttered with bits of a past and place they mistakenly thought was theirs.

VD: Details can be messy. Sometimes it’s best to tarry with their recalcitrance in the face of friendly categories.

AS: Details hold me fast. I think of Roland Barthes’s notion of the *punctum* [“an accident that pricks”], of Gaston Bachelard’s insistence that he sought to write a history of “epistemological detail”—something I thought I was doing in tracking the minutiae mobilized to assess race. It’s not just that details matter; it’s the moment of that detail appearing there, in that form. Legal cases are made in the details, but racial grammars are as well. Racisms depend on indexes to mark differences *made to matter*, an anomalous being-in-the-world, a different human kind. Even in their formative moments, one finds a feverish search for tangible “indices” of those intangibles that can’t be seen or measured.

VD: Your use of the word *indices* is most apposite. Racism is poked with such indices that time exposes as mere signs of convention.

AS: Racism is protean. Essentialisms are always at work, but the features singled out as “essential” don’t stay the same. Diagnostics of difference change, as do the criteria used to count who’s “colored,” “mixed,” or “white.” The colonial archives

are testimonies to shifting racial thresholds, with distinctions that could never be clear enough. The “taming of chance” was inflected with racial fears. Security, surveillance, and counterinsurgency protocols could not cancel out the limits of colonial control.

VD: I pity the civil servant who took upon himself the task of writing down these signs, for I am sure that “reading” these signs called for far more than literacy.

AS: This is precisely what Pierre Bourdieu works through in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*: attunements to a gait, verbal lilt, lexical subtleties, sensibilities, and dress. He never did such work on race. I suppose I have partially taken that as my own project—joined with describing what James Agee called “the slendering forms of liberty.” Distinctions of sound, smell, taste, and touch make one’s own world and render those of others “different.” Bourdieu sifted through the exacting discernments of the French middle class, but I imagine a reading that follows the vectors of their disgust, fear, pity, and contempt with racial biographies of their own.

VD: As you show, they are more than unflattering locutions. Your archival readings bring a Foucauldian reading of surfaces to a whole different plane. Foucault’s brilliance was to see on the archives’ surfaces something other than the written word and what those words in their simple and compounded embodiments represented. For Foucault, those signs indicated their presence by their very absence.

AS: In my own work I’ve tried to attend to the intervals between what is said, need not be said, and cannot be uttered. Without being “hidden.”

VD: I think that categories of habit blind us to the hidden. In your writing, Annie, you confound categories. And before you know it, neat ones are rendered into the most irrational, often monstrous, works of art.

AS: It was not “Theory,” Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, or Foucault but the documents themselves that introduced me to the powerful work that categories are enlisted to do: to their forces and who invested in them, to the explicit deliberations—sometimes bold, elsewhere hesitant or sotto voce asides over their danger and use. This comes out most clearly in the category *Inlandsche kinderen*, a short-lived Indies appellation discussed in *Along the Archival Grain* used to describe an amorphous population of [persons of] “mixed” parentage, poor whites, and

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Indies-born Europeans. The requisite “so-called” announced a distance from and mistrust of the term and of those to whom it referred.

Such pointed qualifications, and their placement, often emerge as my touchstone, as distilled signs and symptoms of political logics nested in them. The connection may not seem obvious, but it’s why reading *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* and *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic* struck such a vital nerve. It too was a moment of recognition, underscoring the moral weight assigned to social categories, the quixotic reversibility of valuations, and not least what the colonial archives show more concretely than Nietzsche did, the very processes by which labels were tethered to kinds of persons and qualities, to practices and things.

VD: *In Cold Blood* comes to mind, when you and I taught your essay “In Cold Blood: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives” in a graduate seminar at Michigan [and] students were unable to catch the excitement of your discovery of Frans Carl Valck and saw him as only dull.

AS: But they were partially right. I was on the cusp of something new. It was my first effort to describe how one is caught, the contortions gone through to make received categories fit, even as someone like Valck realized he couldn’t make them work for him. The very things he was schooled to imagine as common sense didn’t get him where he had to go. Whom could he trust? On what criteria? Here were the tracks of truth making, hour by hour, letter by letter, the radically uncertain process in which claims to credibility and reliable proof were being made. How often do we get to examine how people come to know what they know, imagine they know it—and feel their twitches of doubt in the process?

VD: How unusual to find a civil servant who would have pursued it to the extent that Valck did! And most scholars would not have either. But you did. Others would have given it up as irrelevant in the final analysis, but you did not.

AS: Accounts of European colonials had often been either hagiographic or illustrati[ve] of their racist minds at work. I saw these texts as something else—as indecisive, unconvincing signs of an authority ill at ease with itself. I looked at them as a way to identify what sorts of agents colonial systems crafted, at the non-discrete spaces in which personal and political dispositions were made. I became increasingly drawn to the archive itself, to its making, tenor, tone, and incanta-

tions, [to] phrases repeated or excised. I took these to be methodological and political entry points to what goes in to crafting colonial common sense—what an inquiry assuming a hegemonic colonial rationality could hardly grasp. Valck’s case was about just that. He was defended by those well placed, kin and friends. But what he had to say was never repeated—no official document dared to—that the real barbarians were Europeans.

VD: Of all the figures in the Dutch colonial archives, your ethnographic sensibility leads you not to persons who would easily draw the reader’s attention and curiosity but to this commonplace colonial officer, Valck. And yet it is in him that you find the kind of *déraison* [unreason] that facilitates your genealogical move and enables you to write this critical history of imperial common sense.

AS: My interest in Valck’s commonplaceness was of a piece with ongoing concerns. One can say little of interest about imperial dispositions if one starts off with the assumption that those participating as agents in that world are not as smart, as moral, or as good as whatever collective “we” one might choose as one’s own today.

In 1997 I spent a sabbatical year in Provence, with forty cartons of documents, intending to finish my archive book [*Along the Archival Grain*]. But daily demonstrations for and against Le Pen and the Front National [FN] took me elsewhere. I repacked my library and spent the year interviewing FN officials, mothers, schoolteachers, and others in the town of Vitrolles, where Le Pen’s right-hand man had installed his wife as mayor. I was struck by how similarly people—far right, left, and center—spoke about security, immigrants, [and] delinquency and of their mistrust of politics. It was chilling how deeply raced evaluations shaped daily encounters and what it meant to be French for them all.

That led me to see Valck differently, to ask a different set of questions about what compromises one makes with oneself, how the politics we live in shape our dispositions, [and] what it is to know and not know the consequences for others subjected to those politics and our choices. I knew I needed to know more about Valck. That came some years later, as I describe in the archive book, when I “found” his family archive in a genealogical bureau a floor above where I had worked in the national archives for decades. It was not a more real story of Valck, but a chance to witness how much his self-cultivation as father and loyal civil servant collided and meshed. Pausing in that slip between these personae, [I was] opened to an interior space I had never explored. Self-deception didn’t come close to cover[ing] the machinations of his every day.

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VD: That illustrates well what I wanted to know about your discovery process. I get the sense that when you read the archives you hear the authors' written words in their spoken form, including their inflections of denial. For when I read what you write, I hear your voice, I hear you speak. In these "spoken" words I detect your own acute sensitivity to language, especially as enunciated. The spoken word, I believe, contains and conveys a great deal of what you call sentiment. One perceives in your recent work not only how things are said but, in your trying to say it, an agony involved in knowing how.

AS: I almost never write silently. I speak the words aloud. I need to hear them. I get restless, excited, nervous. I pace the room, scrub the floor, brush dust off leaves, refill jars to calm myself. Sometimes, rarely, it converts to a giddy high, but usually lodges as insistent demand. I like to work on the edges of thoughts I can't yet articulate, that I don't yet know how to think or say.

VD: The reader is induced into sharing in the agony of the quest for the mot juste. When such a reader abides with the struggle, the rewards are consequential. However, in this rushed and yet complaisant academy of ours, there is also the earnest reader who tires easily. You are in breathless search for the mot juste, but even after you've found it, you are discontent and continue to search for more, [to] try out different locutions and rephrasings. Whenever your more acute intellect or a more diligent observation tries to introduce a better distinction, words seem to be obstreperous, or rather you make them seem that way even as you sift and sift again.

AS: It strikes me as a willful concession to do otherwise. If I can't get at it, if connections seem blocked by disciplinary conventions or by the policing of the archives, that's an incitement. I see it less as a style of writing than [as] a style of work: pushing further toward the limits of what one dares to write. The recent work I've been doing on the colony and camp as a political matrix is just that, an excursion across a range of seemingly incommensurable sites that reconfigure not as separate but as abutted or imbricated projects when you stay close to the places and moments in which shared locales, borders, populations, or policies are disaggregated or rejoined. Sometimes the best insights come just before you think you can't go further and have to stop. Counterintuitive urges in archival work are as important as intuitive judgments.

VD: Foucault's approach was to chew off certainty, at least Cartesian certainty. As for archives, certainty is a conceit of those who look in the archive for facts. If the search is for lies, they would look for *certain* lies. Either one is a quest for certainty, isn't it?

AS: How not to allow yourself to revert to received terms, retreat to those in our ready repertoire, when you know they're inadequate. That could be colonialism, intimacy, sovereignty, or any other term held tight and deactivated, shorn of its verbal form. Warding off certainty is partly about prolonging how long I can stay in an indeterminate space without imploding. I've long worked around certain awkward expressions, disjointed phrases, words and things displaced. I use them to avert an easy answer, to block my quick escape.

VD: I suppose this is the difference between your working in the archives and working *in* the archives. For some, going to the archives and finding the footnote is finding a fact, a settling of doubt.

AS: Attending more closely to doubt, how it is manifest, how it is placated [or] soothed or remains disruptive, produces a productive strain that makes room for other histories. Either one rushes to reassuring points of stability, [to] familiar categories and the narratives in which they fit, or one refuses to flee, "tarries" as you often put it, as John L. Austin did with "excuses," to fill the hollows of what is not said, need not be said, or cannot be said then and there.

VD: Clearly, Valck was one who wore his categorical certainties very lightly.

AS: I'm not sure he would have thought so. I think Valck has held me for so many decades because he starts out with certainties, thinking he knows, and the more he learns, the less tenable his earlier assumptions become because he can't make up an account that's coherent in the way it should be, on the basis of those categories. And then that rebounds on how I need to write his story—a coherent account becomes a less viable option as a style of writing. So that's the moment in which his doubt and my writing are in concord. In the archival book, tone, temper, and dissonance open to occluded sentiments in what I think of as "a minor key."

VD: Valck began as a knower, who believed that what he knew was true, and ended being a doubter, if not an unbeliever, of what he had taken to be true. How

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about you, Annie, as a historian-anthropologist, how do you set out to inquire? Do you begin as a believer in a major key, as an insatiable skeptic, or as an agnostic?

AS: I suppose my skepticisms can be productive, but as with any of us, cynical disillusion (which Peter Sloterdijk skewers) can get in the way. I began anthropology at a time when asking historical questions about the United States in Vietnam, British incursions in Ireland, and Dutch American multinationals in colonial Indonesia was not just an academic choice. However, naively, I conceived of these choices as political acts. I do think that documenting not only inequalities but what makes their endurance possible, what makes their visible damage so evident—and their mechanisms not—ought to be compelling pursuits of those of us privileged enough to have the means and conditions of life to do so. Do I begin inquiry as a “believer in a major key”? Perhaps when I was younger, less so today. I’m not agnostic with respect to the pertinence of certain subjects, but [I am] skeptical of hardened conviction. I’d like to think that I’m learning how to ask better questions.

VD: How do you see theory in anthropology?

AS: Far less imposing than it often imagines itself to be. I rarely use the word when I teach or with respect to my own work. I prefer to think about concepts that do work and that you work with. There’s no taking a concept and plugging it in. They need to be treated as provisional and subject to change. Conceptually, one is implicated. Critique puts you at potential and productive risk. You might call it, Val, a refusal of certitudes, a disruption of habit.

VD: You’re clearly averse to reductionist scientism in anthropology. You are a tireless explorer of the figurative dimension of language for the precise figure of speech to get your point across. But do you fear that figures of speech could lead you astray?

AS: I’m increasingly attentive to what I say and how I say it. Nietzsche may have been right that concepts are dead metaphors, but they can also be generative sites. They open new analytic space and new associations. Like *rhizomes* or *assemblages* or *biopower*, concepts can become political actors when they stretch our visions to new domains.

In *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, I turned to Derek Walcott’s language because I found it conceptually and politically so apt—and quietly fierce.

When he writes that “the rot remains,” I don’t take it as “mere” metaphor. It opens to psychic and material degradations as ongoing processes. Like debris, it’s not where you might expect it to be. It takes on tangible and intangible form. Walcott, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire too sought to identify what I call “durabilities of duress.”

VD: Indeed, metaphors are to be shaped and delimited by the thoughtfulness brought to them.

AS: Paul Rabinow puts it differently when he invokes Foucault’s notion that our problematizations must measure up to those that matter in the world. It’s the point at which conceptual work becomes unhinged from what matters that I let go. When political traction is lost, I lose interest.

VD: Well put. You have convinced me, for now. Where does your interest in philosophy come from?

AS: Not from an interest in philosophy per se but initially from efforts to understand how people ascribe racial attributes and what kind of knowledge they imagine they have, or need, to do so. Anthropology has ceded and conceded too much conceptual work to (political) philosophy. We “borrow,” rehearse, and reference philosophical concepts. As historians of the present and emergent, we could claim privileged locations for conceptual innovation. It’s what has attracted me to the idea of rethinking ethnography as “fieldwork in philosophy,” a term Austin used, Bourdieu took up, and Rabinow redeployed. I like to think of ethnographic and historical practice as conceptual labor that can challenge the obeisance we sometimes pay to philosophy.

VD: We’ve heard the expression “common sense” bandied about in anthropology-land at least since Bourdieu’s “sens commun” in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. *Common sense* figures in the subtitle of your most recent book. What does it do for you?

AS: Michael Herzfeld claims that “anthropology” is the “comparative study of common sense.” It strikes me rather as our conceit. We’re often clueless about what constitutes common sense, how it is achieved or how to study it. We have not addressed its normalizing force. I’m interested in when common sense doesn’t do its job, when its sharedness is disrupted or its project betrayed. An understanding

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of “common sense” demands attention to its power to coerce and appease, [to] its relational capacities that make certain ways of seeing the world more viable, convincing, available, and protected from reflective thought.

Foucault’s definition of a historical event as a breach of self-evidence alerts one to epistemic disruption; in that sense it’s an analytic tool. You say I don’t use tools, but I do, not in a formalized way but perhaps in the sense that Barthes treats the *punctum* in photography. It demands a different kind of attention to the familiar and strange, to both what is singular and significant, what is intentionally askew and out of place.

VD: You use concepts to explode obstacles, scattering their debris. They act differently every time, but also similarly in the sense that such concepts make a clearing.

AS: A breach is a conceptual event of sorts. It can be momentary, then quickly closed over, or it can give rise to lasting doubts. But it’s symptomatic of a problem in the consensual, implicit knowledge that common sense is supposed to possess.

VD: In this method of inquiry, how do you encounter these breaches, identify them, and determine if they were productive?

AS: Breaches are what give the archive its grit. Reading along the grain can’t be fast and dirty. Rancière, like Foucault, when asked why he turned from philosophy to history replied that he couldn’t do philosophy without it. It’s in that space between archival and conceptual labor that I get analytic traction and most like to work. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault anticipates his reader’s rebuff and challenge to the concepts he uses, with the defense that he will use them temporarily to undo them later. The challenge in teaching is to show the work concepts do, to retain them in their provisional mode, not as sites of authorization. The same goes for our use of philosophy in anthropology. How much does it authorize our claims to do “Theory” with a capital *T*? Or do we have something to offer that could unsettle that analytic hierarchy?

The book I’m working on now addresses the methodological and conceptual work we might need to do to write histories of the present that are less entrapped by the categories and archives of imperial rule themselves. The concept of the recursive rather than the repeated is important to this project. Foucault’s readers have long argued that he was a philosopher/historian of rupture and discontinuity.

I think his more interesting concept—one we haven't thought through—is the historical movement between recursivity and rupture.

VD: What does recursivity look like in colonial history?

AS: It's NOT that the postcolonial world mimics colonial norms, structures, and relations. We need to ask what forms are resilient. Are they embedded in habits of privilege or in those of acquiescence? Are they found in what is perceived as humiliation or in what counts as duress? What conditions the possibility of some elements becoming available and not others? I think of recursivity as refoldings that expose different (social) surfaces and historical planes. Recursion is neither a faithful copy nor a direct "translation." It might be closer to what Jamaica Kincaid describes in *A Small Place* as the distribution of what is left to rot, where toxicities accumulate, and who is subject to them. Recursive histories display reworkings that don't look or feel quite the same.

VD: What precipitated your move from Dutch colonialism to US empire?

AS: It didn't feel like much of a stretch. Almost twelve years ago, a friend and feminist historian, Linda Gordon, invited me to organize a plenary session at the Organization of American Historians meetings on empire and the intimate, on the thought that US historians needed more of what some of us were doing in colonial studies. It turned out to be an enabling alliance for those already moving in that direction; for me, that direct engagement with US empire prompted a reflective critique of my own work and of colonial studies more generally. It underscored less the narrowness of US history than the constrained scope of colonial studies and the sites of exception it considered off its analytic and political chart.

My very first "ethnographic" experience was a political one: a carload of Columbia students and faculty descending on a Mahwah Ford factory to talk with people about the Vietnam War. It was a small fiasco. My first fieldwork proper was in 1972—the toxic effects of the green revolution on landless women in rural Java. US imperialism was not far from either concern. When I began work in the 1980s on colonial histories of race making, I found myself thinking [about] the span of US empire again. The 1930s South African Carnegie Commission investigations on poor whites, a set of proto-apartheid ethnographic-like studies in which US experts were deeply involved, shared much with the state-commissioned investigation on "needy Europeans" in Java some thirty years earlier.

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Turning to the United States was an opportunity to reconsider a less restricted breadth of imperial forms, with the opacities of colonial rule as distinctive and fundamental as their more visible features. Military bases, nuclear testing sites, [and] prison camps came into sharpened view: Hawaii, the Bikini Islands, New Caledonia, and Palestine emerged as emblematic, not imperial, exceptions. Graduated degrees of sovereignty were not aberrant moments in imperial expansions but part of their geopolitical grammar. Imperial terminology was not just “wild,” as Hannah Arendt called it, but willfully obscure. Trusteeships, “possessions,” mandates, and, not least, deferred and partial sovereignties could be seen to represent not mild-measured, weakened imperial forms but rather a recalibrated reassignment of empire’s tactical operations. My problematics shifted as well. To understand how these situations were historically made incommensurable required treating comparison itself not as a benign methodology but as a set of historically specific political practices.

VD: You visited Israel and Palestine a few years ago. Was this an extension of your American work?

AS: Going to the West Bank, to Palestinian refugee camps, and to Israel for the first time as the “security” wall was going up forced a different set of questions about what constituted colonial design. I now think that Edward Said’s indictment of anthropology could have been easily expanded to many of us working in colonial studies at the time. Palestine and Israel remained peripheral to our vision of the colonial order of things when they could have and should have been placed at its critical center. When attention to security studies mushroomed after 9/11, I was again struck by the deep colonial precedents, outside the purview of most political scientists writing on the “new” security regimes. These were recursive histories of empire, not new installations.

Racialized plots are conveyed in narrative form but also by the selective accumulation of documents appended to make a dossier—the “story” is articulated by the particular paper trails colonial authorities either pointed to or turned away from. These are actually sites in which political logics are nourished, sustained, and given more credence by the form of documentation itself. What stories can be told, which ones don’t fit, which accounts get repeated, whose marginalia counts, [and] who gets to scribble across a document rather than lightly on the edge of a page are the watermarks of a political reason gone askew or astray.

VD: Do you treat marginalia as parenthetical interruptions?

AS: More often, they are moments of breach. When someone writes “What?” in a margin, something’s not as it should be within the script itself, or rather not scripted as it “should” be. You have to ask what happened. Did common sense have a momentary lapse? Was a warning to abide by a convention disregarded? What constitutes a “correction” is key. Excisions and additions are telling signs. Race making is folded into these revisions. As in Valck’s case, epistemic doubt emerges in how he receives the accounts he is offered and in how he retells them.

VD: I want to briefly visit the insight you bring to this notion of *déraison* on which you’re working at present. You seem to suggest that the empire must be studied, but [you] caution us against accepting reason at face value, especially when it is clothed in common sense, enlightened by reasonableness, and you urge us not to look for reason’s opposite, unreason, but for *déraison*, lodged in the folds of reason itself. Tell us about the form and content of this phenomenon called *déraison*.

AS: Ian Hacking pointed out in his foreword to the new English edition of the *History of Madness* that it’s really not a book about madness at all. The concept of *déraison*, so prominent in the title of the 1961 French edition, just disappears. I was fascinated by what Foucault imagined he was doing with it, what this notion of *déraison* could be. I read the book as a historical negative, less about madness than [about] the changing contours of reason itself. One can think of it as an analytic move Foucault makes to loosen the grip that a sanctimonious adherence to a rationalized way of seeing the world so tightly seals. It’s a very Nietzschean strategy in that regard. He uses *déraison* as a way of inversely, perversely tracing what falls in and out of what reason becomes. *Déraison* seems to work as an adjustable placeholder, something like the relationship between qualified and disqualified knowledge, with the latter both distinct from and folded into what makes up qualified knowledge and makes it possible.

VD: Was Valck such a placeholder? Did you find him to be your moment of *déraison*?

AS: Valck certainly wasn’t mad. He was boring, wearing, and weary. Little about him draws your attention. As one of his superiors disparagingly put it, he was “not an incompetent man.” But what counts as colonial reason comes into view as Valck calls it into question, as he and his interlocutors twist and turn, accept and reject the accounts, rumors, heresy that splice “the story” into so many different renditions and then again into acceptable and unacceptable versions. We

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are privy to colonial “reason” without it being stated as such—in what he does not subscribe to, what he is chided for, [and] what he imagines he is doing and what he is not.

VD: For some, a book is expected to be a work of appeasement. It’s to answer questions. We want it to settle doubts, which in turn makes us feel settled by its end. As a rule, an ethnography is designed to be orderly, whereas the ethnographic context itself first strikes the field-worker as disorderly—disorder of hierarchies, of insignificances, some significant here but not there. It’s what the ethnographer often conceals. I imagine the archive is not very different. A close reader can get to the unordered and disordered. You are that kind of reader. But few writers have the ability to reveal glimpses into this “disorder,” not through the content but in the very style of their writing. I consider you to be such a writer. Can you say something about how you do that?

AS: The colonial archives are noisy spaces, alive with dissension, posturing, snide remarks, bad excuses, correctives, and dispute. Sometimes I think I can almost hear a pause or quickening pace, an impatient throat cleared or embarrassed cough. If you’re going to do it differently and disappoint one set of expectations, then you had better show why there’s possibly more to gain by not succumbing to the pleasure of resolution. Unsettledness in intellectual work can be a far more productive place to be. You can’t see differently if you hold too long and too tight to what you’ve done before.

VD: Your disposition in your art of inquiry seems to tend toward a refusal—to accept the given as it were. Do you carry this same spirit of refusal to yourself, your person, more or less the way Foucault did when he encouraged us to refuse to be who we are?

AS: I came to identity politics through the contexts in which I’ve worked. There “identity politics,” if you will, claimed privilege, profit, and priority for Europeans and whites and denied access to those who did not meet the designated criteria in a colonial world. That entry point made “identity”—even strategic essentialisms—a dubious political affair. It’s hard to study colonial governance for some thirty years without looking upon “identity,” and the technologies crafted to know who people really are, as not reinscribing race.

VD: You've also chosen to collaborate a lot with colleagues, but also with your students. You are one of the most collaborative persons, at least in terms of discussing your thoughts and quite openly sharing them. Can you say how these collaborative adventures have gone?

AS: I like that definition: sharing as collaboration. Ethnographic work is so full of people, but we often make parts of it such solitary and lonely tasks. It's taken me a long time to have the confidence to share unfinished work, drafts, muddled thoughts in motion. When I finished my dissertation, I left it collated backward for months so no one could read it, only recollating when I decided to quickly revise and send it to the press. I can still recognize that fear when it surges, but now it's tempered by the pleasure (and fear and excitement) of giving something of yourself to that friend who you know will be just short of ruthless and who you entrust to be just that.

I now find myself thrilled (if still anxious) by what can happen in those encounters, these productive moments of exposure. Everything I have written over the past fifteen years comes out of the communities in which I have gotten to share. When I was writing *Race and the Education of Desire*, I called on every friend I could corner in a café or on the phone. My folders from that summer bulge with the scribbled notes, the drafts friends commented upon, their references, their thoughts, their queries across a page.

For *Along the Archival Grain*, I don't think I could accurately say how many people I enlisted for help, as the writing spanned some twenty years—counting from the first essay in 1990. If it was “untimely” at the time, it didn't remain so for long. In the very year I gave the Lewis Henry Morgan lectures on “ethnography in the archives,” Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* hit the shelves. Shall I really admit that I was thrown off course? Coming several years after I had begun thinking [about] the archive book, *Archive Fever* in fact challenged me. I had to articulate what was distinctive about an ethnographic immersion in colonial archives, to spell out what archival “events” could look like, to clarify their violent effects, and, not least, to register how deft cribbing, stalled exchanges, and selective citations were the political substance of governing practices etched into the archives' mottled grain.

VD: Intellectually, you're an interesting blend of having an analytic mind but also driven in a way to the aesthetic sensibility. So is there one person or some principal personality that inspired you in both directions?

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AS: Surely my sister, Barbara, who died eighteen years ago, at fifty-three. All of our shared life, she was my mentor and model, my icon and inquisitor, my support and my judge. She was a Sanskritist who taught at Barnard for twenty-five years, had studied philosophy, and was a consummate translator of Indian epic poetry. Married very young, and with nine years separating us, she was always already grown up when I was small. Cultivation of herself and of me began when I was a little girl. In every gesture and word was the message that an aesthetically rich, rigorously disciplined, creative, scholarly infused way of inhabiting one's every day not only mattered. It was a way of work and a way of life. I was awestruck as a child, paralyzed as an adolescent, increasingly recalcitrant as an undergraduate at Barnard, and later defiant and empowered by her confidence in me when I railed against the choices she had made. She proudly hailed my "radical" politics but never joined me.

To be intellectually attuned was to know how to read and what to read, how to listen, to see, to speak, to write. She believed that my life should be saturated early with cultural treasures, as hers, she felt, had not been. But more important, she taught me to love words, their sounds, to take care with them, to take pleasure in the multiple meanings a single well-chosen word might convey. She was a master in the art of translation, and in her search for the precise and perfect word, she made it a game and invited me to play. "Annie, do both senses of 'honey' come through if I use this word this way?" She was provisioning me and educating my desires. She was a steadfast taskmaster, generous and difficult, always pushing and luring me further than she felt she got to go.

VD: Some of us are chosen, some choose, and some (as Max Weber said) are "called." Do you have an autobiographical backdrop against which we can see and understand you in your present disposition as an intellectual activist? Do you see being Jewish as part of that story?

AS: It wasn't so much *what* my world was like but my "discovery" of what my world was like that shaped me. I grew up in an upper-middle-class Long Island suburb so predominantly Jewish that as young children we hardly seemed to know how distinct a world it was. The realization that we lived in an ethnic and class bubble was coupled first with embarrassment [and] later with an agitated unease around all sorts of sentiments of affiliation. It's a discomfort that undoubtedly continues to mold my aversions and attentions, if not my beliefs. Only after writing *Race and the Education of Desire* did I realize how much the racial

markers and class diacritics about which I wrote were vividly resonant, if not autobiographical.

VD: Annie, you are one of the most productive scholars of your generation. May I ask you something personal here? How do you manage this, or how did you manage this [while] raising a family of two children and having a long-term partner?

AS: It's a little like exercise, Val. Some people find it really hard to get themselves to exercise and then feel tired during and after they do it. For others, it's an addiction, energizing—an endorphin high. Work is obviously the latter for me. I get sluggish when I don't work (and don't exercise). Every family has traumas and tragedies, urgent demands that can't be put off, unrelenting responsibilities, pleasures that don't fit your deadlines, impossible losses and pain. It's a cliché, but my family and friends are ballast; [they] keep my work inclinations in perspective, if not in check. Family is sustenance, security, support, a space to exhale—a privilege every day. Having a family has never made work harder to get to, just better to do.

But it was true also of the way our families grew up in Ann Arbor: families and friendships meshed. That too is a privilege—how we've gotten to live: in a quiet, well-tended college town, no commute, jobs we couldn't easily lose, in [a] community that congealed around work and warmth. I needed to leave Ann Arbor, but not because I didn't appreciate what it so generously offered.

VD: And New York?

AS: New York is a homecoming, and the New School feels like one, an exhilarant, unexpected convergence in many senses. Both have brought together family, friendships, political concerns, and writing, but also a different demand, and even urgency, to pursue what my colleague Jim Miller calls “an examined life.”

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