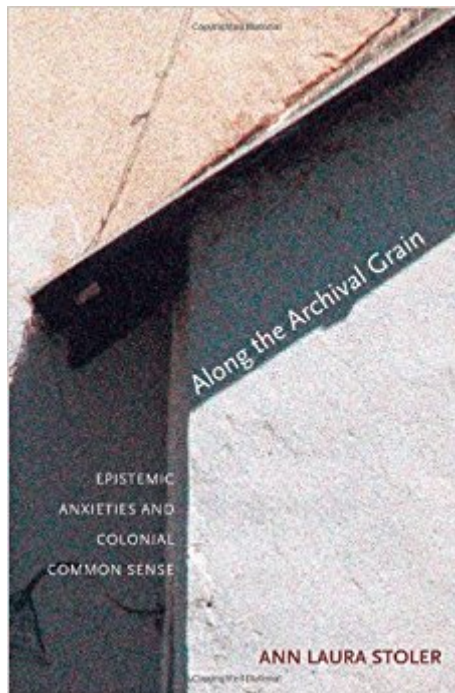




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Along The Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties And Colonial Common Sense



Synopsis

Along the Archival Grain offers a unique methodological and analytic opening to the affective registers of imperial governance and the political content of archival forms. In a series of nuanced mediations on the nature of colonial documents from the nineteenth-century Netherlands Indies, Ann Laura Stoler identifies the social epistemologies that guided perception and practice, revealing the problematic racial ontologies of that confused epistemic space. Navigating familiar and extraordinary paths through the lettered lives of those who ruled, she seizes on moments when common sense failed and prevailing categories no longer seemed to work. She asks not what colonial agents knew, but what happened when what they thought they knew they found they did not. Rejecting the notion that archival labor be approached as an extractive enterprise, Stoler sets her sights on archival production as a consequential act of governance, as a field of force with violent effect, and not least as a vivid space to do ethnography.

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Customer Reviews

Students of colonialism often try to read "against the grain" of colonial conventions. Through analytic tactics of inversion and recuperation, they seek to give voice and agency to the voiceless and the powerless, and to recast colonial subjects as agents who made choices and critiques of their own. Conversely, they treat empire builders and colonial administration agents as the mere carriers of structures, as pawns in a power game whose archival traces and narratives must be read as ideological constructs of domination, exploitation, and racial abuse. As Ann Laura Stoler states in her introduction, one fundamental premise of this book is a commitment to a less assured and perhaps

more humble stance: "to explore the grain with care and read along it first." As she explains, reading along the archival grain "draws our sensibilities to the archive's granular rather than seamless texture, to the rough surface that mettles its hue and shapes its form". Taking the pulse of the archive diagnoses the ethnographer with a bad case of archive fever: hard questions are forced to the forefront, "contexts" are destabilized, the outlines of "events" appear less clearly bound, commonsense assumptions are on the line. The official documents of Dutch colonial archives are so weighted with fixed formats, empty phrases, and racial clichés that one is easily blinded by their flattened prose and numbing dullness. But archives are not simply accounts of action or records of what people thought happened. Against the sober formulaics of officialese, they register the febrile movements of persons off balance, of thoughts and feelings in and out of place.

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