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Book Review: The Archive of Loss

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***The Archive of Loss: Lively Ruination in Mill Land Mumbai*, by Maura Finkelstein (2019).
Durham, NC: Duke University Press.**

In the context of Dhanraj Spinning and Weaving, Ltd., Mumbai's oldest still-operating textile mill, the lives of workers are curiously absent from the existing archives. Dominant media narratives, material artifacts, museum exhibits, and old photographs of the Indian city's nineteenth-century textile boom gloss over the accounts of mill workers as though they no longer exist. But Maura Finkelstein's book, *The Archive of Loss: Lively Ruination in Mill Land Mumbai*, unsettles the conventional view that material evidence is the only reliable source of truth. In the book, Finkelstein asks how one can write the history of "lively ruins" (p. 31)—of liveliness, presence, and vitality within closure and ruination—from the standpoint of mill workers long thought to be dead and gone, but who in fact continue to toil, churn their yarn, and produce cotton threads. In doing so, she argues that the "unvisibility" (p. 32) of these workers' labor is necessary for postindustrial capitalism to thrive in contemporary Mumbai.

Finkelstein proposes that *archives* can refer not only to written documents from established institutions that act as gatekeepers of knowledge, but also to ethnographic observations of workers' everyday lives. As such, she documents stories that would otherwise be lost, judged unworthy of preservation since they do not speak to the logic of postindustrialism that is commonly invoked to examine infrastructural shifts in cities like Mumbai. In the five chapters of her book, Finkelstein draws on the testimonies of Dhanraj workers for insight into their identities, sense of belonging, living conditions, and work life—navigating through stories that are often embedded with messy claims and murky truths. In addition to collecting testimonies as a source of archival material, Finkelstein combines ethnography with photography—juxtaposing the crumbling Dhanraj factory (p. 3) with Mumbai's sleek skyscrapers (p. 18)—in order to analyze the spatial inequalities of this lively and sprawling city.

The book both exposes and challenges the ways in which popular conceptions of deindustrialization shape experiences of loss and abandonment for working-class communities in a postindustrial society. For instance, when Finkelstein arrived in Mumbai in 2008, an activist lawyer told her that Dhanraj is a "fake" mill, which sustains an illusion about the once-mighty mill lands and their workers. In the book's introduction, "The Archive of Industrial Debris," and its first chapter, "The Archive of the Mill," Finkelstein argues that describing the Dhanraj mill as "fake" and its workers as "residues," or leftovers of an industrial past, overlooks how the mill currently hosts both artsy lifestyle stores and dilapidated sweatshops. This misconception also belies the fact that Dhanraj continues to be economically active, rendering its workers—who do not fit into the dominant narrative of postindustrial productivity—into "ghostly specters" (p. 53).

From a postindustrial point of view, workers employed in the Dhanraj mill are people out of time, whose temporality is radically disjoint from that of the contemporary moment. This nonrecognition of labor—explored in the second chapter, “The Archive of the Worker”—is echoed in eight words uttered by Finkelstein’s informant Manda: “my legs ache from twenty years of standing” (p. 61). The visceral exhaustion and pain felt by mill workers is revealed to be not only a physical experience, but also the preserve of memories of being transformed into “elements of industrial machinery” (p. 67) or cyborgs, called to “work with machines in ways that alter the chemical, material, and affective dimensions of what it means to be human” (p. 66).

“The Archive of the Chawl,” the book’s third chapter, delves into the spatial and temporal ruptures of living in chawls or *basti*—the compressed structures built to house workers that are traditionally referred to as “working-class tenements” (p. 89). The chawls symbolize a tension between the lived past and the imagined future and they incite feelings of nostalgia for economic progress, which are borne out of a myth of industrial permanence. Additionally, the chapter grapples with concerns about forceful displacement and resettlement amid the incessant and shifting demands for redevelopment.

In her fourth chapter, “The Archive of the Strike,” Finkelstein analyzes untruth as “metadata” (p. 122), specifically examining the rumors, silences, and invented stories emerging from two parallel histories of a strike during the 1980s. How, she wonders, are we supposed to archive the phantoms that workers experience, which contradict verifiable facts but are nonetheless critical in constructing a sense of self? If, indeed, no account can prove that before the strike 80 percent of mill workers were North Indians until a program that reserved jobs for workers from the state of Maharashtra was introduced, then why does Kishan, a migrant worker from the northern state of Bihar, insist on this version of events? How does his current position within Dhanraj, as someone who is “only allowed to be a winder at the mill, a menial job historically occupied by women” (p. 118), inform his understanding of the Maharashtrians’ assertion of their right to work?

What also mystifies the predicament of the workers are the occasional fires that break out on mill lands. The sources of night fires are obscure, but result in fantastical plots and subplots about scheming owners and developers attempting to shut down the mill’s unprofitable units. In the book’s fifth chapter, “The Archive of the Fire,” Finkelstein posits that the Dhanraj mill fire of 2009 and the rumors surrounding the incident became autonomous agents that spread with great velocity and consumed things that stood in their way. As such, the process of understanding the fire, which sped up the degeneration of the mill’s physical existence, was also one of learning about the pace of deindustrialization, joblessness, and the workers’ frustration with incompetent management.

Finkelstein’s decade-long commitment to and engagement with Dhanraj mill workers are reflected in the concerns that she raises: as jobs go away, who gets seen? Are there others left unseen? And, if so, are we willing to see them too? In each chapter-archive, Finkelstein urges the reader to reflect on how

some forms of work in contemporary capitalist society are rendered meaningless in order to sustain others. While the testimonies that she collects may be unverifiable, they never slip into the register of fictionalized narratives because—in Finkelstein’s argument—“to create the genre of ‘ethnographic fiction’ is to assume that ethnographic nonfictions are peopled by informants who ‘tell the truth’” (p. 122). Thus, Finkelstein fundamentally questions the authority and status of archives by meticulously recording the experiences of workers, even when these may not be “true” or even their own. Researchers studying the history of Mumbai’s textile mills, the processes of deindustrialization, storytelling, and archiving, and affect theory will find value in engaging with this book.

Author Bio

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