

# UNEARTHING TRACES

Dismantling imperialist entanglement of archives and the built environment

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## SWISSUNIVERSITIES DOCTORAL COURSE

**Date:** 12.–14. Mai 2021 (provisional)

### Place

EPFL Lausanne – 2 days conference

CAN Centre d'Art de Neuchâtel / Ville de Neuchâtel – 1 day field work and public lecture

### Keywords

Archival practices; Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies; Imagined Records and Missing Documents; Architectural History and the built environment; Politics and Aesthetics of the Colonial and of the Postcolonial; Critical Studies; Civil Rights, Memory culture and historiography

### Institutions

UNIL – EPFL – CAN (Centre d'Art de Neuchâtel)

### Collaborators

- . *Stéphanie Ginalski*, historian, Maître d'enseignement et de recherche, UniL
- . *Lucía Jalón Oyarzun*, EPFL, Post.Doc, SUR, Escuela de bellas artes, Pedagogical Director
- . *Julien Lafontaine Carboni*, doctoral researcher and architect, EPFL, Labo ALICE
- . *Denise Bertschi*, doctoral reasearcher and artist, EPFL, Labo LAPIS
- . CAN Centre d'Art de Neuchâtel, Martin Jakob, curator

*'History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror. I wanted to write a romance that exceeded the fictions of history- the rumors, scandals, lies, invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts, impossible metaphors, chance events, and fantasies that constitutes the archive and determine what can be said about the past. I longed to write a new story, one unfettered by the constraints of the legal documents and exceeding the restatement and transpositions, which comprised my strategy for disordering and transgressing the protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements and which enabled me to augment and intensify its fictions.'*

Saidiya, Hartman. « Venus in Two Acts ». Small Axe 12, no 2 (2008): 9.

With the “swissuniversities” doctoral courses « Unearthing Traces » we propose to explore and learn about memory processes, power structures in archival practices in relation to the built environment and material architectural traces. With the participation of a wide array of thinkers and practitioners in archival and artistic practices, historians and researcher in architecture and social sciences, the course explores how imagined records and traces can be composed and grounded in the context of academic research in order to implement them into an historical argumentation. A particular emphasis will be made on architectural and spatial traces and records both through the methodologies of urban critical and postcolonial studies and through questioning the imperialist dimensions of the architecture of archives and built environments. After two days in the form of a conference, the fieldwork in Neuchâtel constitutes both an opportunity to actively apply these methodologies, and to question the colonial entanglements of Switzerland through a collective and embodied research process «in situ». Students across different disciplines -architecture, history, arts, political sciences- will be solicited, in order to decompartmentalize disciplines in this process. The spreading of archival practices responds to one of the major issues faced by communities in decolonization processes; the monopoly of knowledge and the destruction of other forms of knowledge circulation by imperial powers, enacting barriers to other histories than the dominant ones (Stoler 2008). The rejection of other records still constitutes a major obstacle to the legitimation of cultures and alternative narratives, and sometimes, to the achievement of justice (Caswell 2014). This phenomenon is emphasized by intersectionality, the appartenance to several minority group -based on race, gender, sexuality, economic class...

Beyond the intentional segregation of archival documents, the “absence” in archives is grounded on the limits of the sayable (Hartmann 2008), issued from the episteme and tekhné of a time (Foucault 1966). Thus, western archives, by standardizing the ontology of their documents hid, erased, obstructed and de-valuated certain (organic) forms of knowledge (Povinelli 2011), amplifying the biases of misrepresentations. The European urban environment still supports and perpetuates the economies of symbols of colonialism (Mbembe 2002), both in their physical materiality and virtual one, from the origins of materials to the toponymy of their places. As such, there is an urge to deconstruct and re-ground our understanding and reading of both our archives and our environments in relation to one-another, to unearth hidden traces, exhume obstructed narratives and give ground to « potential histories » (Azoulay 2019).

Since the Archival turn (Simon 2002) in artistic and academic practices, more and more archival practitioners developed methodologies to deal with imagined records (Gilliland and Caswell 2015), untaken photographs (Azoulay 2012), missing pictures (Pahn 2013), ghostly matters (F. Gordon

1997), or haunting legacies (Schwab 2010). The multiplicity of textures and materialities of these documents and records, from the hidden or forgotten spatial traces to embodied traumas and imaginary photographs, shed light on the growing prominence of imagination, critical/spectulative fabulation (Hartmann, 2008, Harraway 2016) and affect (Dever 2010) in archival and historical practices to recover buried histories. In doing so, the aim is not to give voice to the deads, 'but rather to imagine what cannot be verified [...]. It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.' (Hartman 2008:12), in order to consider 'at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matter absent, entangled and unavailable by its method' (Lowe 2006, 208). Engaging with the local context of Neuchâtel as one of the most implicated Swiss cities in a «colonial Switzerland without colonies» (Purtschert 2012), we aim to rehearse (Azoulay, 2019) a set of methodologies in tracing architectural structures and spacial situations regarding their material histories and political/economical existences. Switzerland was considered for a longtime to be uninvolved in colonialism, supported by the narrative of its „neutral" role in world politics. Newer research has proved otherwise: The Swiss entanglement in a colonial world system as a quasi-imperialist power (Fischer-Tiné 2015) was marked by its strong interconnectedness through a Swiss economic expansion in a global trade system based on capitalist agriculture, land-expropriation and deforestation or transit-trade with colonial goods as coffee, textiles or precious stones. Its surplus flowed back into the Swiss system, its built cities and institutions. To investigate these material witnesses (Schuppli 2020) of such historical connectedness, we will visit in Neuchâtel the following sites: the Villa of the Museum of Ethnography (MEN), the Hospital of Préfargier, the Place de Pury, the Espace Tilo Frey (formerly: Espace Louis-Agassiz), and others. We reflect on how to decolonise public space, and how to mediate multi-layered histories of architectural sites while problematising their economic and cultural entanglements through perceiving the « spirit of place ».

Current public debates and practices around erasing statues of colonists and men involved in slavery in the wake of the #blacklivesmatter has also begun to shake the swiss society and reflections around the built environment. What is the legitimation of maintaining of such names, monuments, buildings without awareness what racializing practices they stand for? How the narrate, analyze and write revisited historiographies and how to move on from here? The Centre d'Art de Neuchâtel (CAN) serves as a basis of this research day, while exploring the city with the aim to 'unlearn' our gaze and ask new questions. As one of the organizers is currently in an artistic residency at the CAN, it is a useful way of bringing together academic and artistic interventions.

### **Problematics**

How can we deal with ontologies of archival documents and epistemic frames while working in historical fields?

Which methodologies and epistemologies have been and can be used to work with these imagined records and traces? What is the role of imagination in the archives, notably in relation to what might have been, misrepresentations and intersectionality?

How these documents have been already been used by various fields, as artists, historians, humanities and also, for justice? In other words, what is the nature of their agency? What is the effect of the Digital Turn in the archival practices? How it maintains or not, modify or not the traditional archival bias (Putnam 2016)?

How to unearth hidden traces or exhume obstructed narratives through the lens of material witnesses (Schuppli 2020)? And then, how to act on the basis of revealed multi-layered histories and traces in the built environment?

### **Pedagogical outcome, assignment**

Zine/Publication: As a learning outcome, the doctoral course aims to make a small publication with visual and textual material created by the participants after engaging with the material history of Neuchâtel. This will be co-published with the CAN – Centre d'Art in Neuchâtel and EPFL in a small format.

Each participant contributes one-three pages of content, which can be visual or/and textual. The material will be assigned by the 'maître d'enseignement' of UNIL and EPFL. The organisers of the course, Denise Bertschi and Julien Lafontaine Carboni will edit and layout the contributions into a small publication in the format of a Zine.

### **Archival documents**

This course brings together a diversity of research methods by the presence of each participant around questions of power structures of archives. The first day serves to collect and learn from each other by an 8 min. presentation of each doctoral student of one specific archival artefact from his/her PhD research (oral, written, image, or material), which problematizes the question of power structures of archives and memory. A feedback from advanced researcher will be provided to each student, in order to maximise and individualize the impact of the learning outcomes on the individual research.

The Course aims at providing a theoretical, methodological and interdisciplinary frame to the PhD Students allowing for a critical understanding of their own archival research, and its relation their terrain of investigations; how certain realities are misrepresented by the archives, and how certain spaces demand for the unearthing of traces in the archives to decolonize them.

### **Invited Lecturers (Potential)**

The choice of the (potential) lecturers is made in order to respect a gender balance, with both young and advanced researchers, coming from a diverse academic field (architecture, critical urbanism, contemporary history, gender studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, curatorial practices, memory studies, anthropology, archival studies, philosophy), as well as extra-academic practitioners (from architecture, artistic practices, association members and activists, film directors...). Furthermore, a particular attention has been drawn in order to invite people of non western backgrounds.