

Maura Finkelstein



The Archive of Loss

LIVELY RUINATION
IN MILL LAND MUMBAI

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of Loss

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Detail. 2015. 60 × 66 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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A Note on *Intimate Geographies*

India, the country of my birth, has been a long-standing obsession of mine. Even though the greater portion of my life has been spent outside of its borders, it has never ceased to be a figment of fantasy, a place of epic proportions beyond facts. I had the privilege of returning to the country—living in Calcutta briefly, and then Bombay—between 2006 and 2017. It was a time that yielded a much sought after intimacy with a culture, with a place. For a self-proclaimed nomad, the time spent there meant a great deal to me. As an artist, it is the firmament upon which I stand.

The four hand-drawn illustrations in this book were specially commissioned by Maura Finkelstein. I am grateful to her for giving me free rein to interpret the four maps of India, the states of Uttar Pradesh/Bihar and Maharashtra, and the city of Bombay. Central Bombay, where much of the author's research takes place, was also the location of my most recent solo exhibition. I worked within the compound of the old textile mill central to this monograph, in one of the magnificent crumbling rooms, to produce many of the works. I can still smell the mold and visualize the old, crackling walls.

These drawings are an assimilation of my lived experience. Although I referenced nineteenth-century anatomical illustrations, I fancy the resulting marks as resembling a form of hieroglyphics. I wanted to internalize what India means to me and, undoubtedly, what it means to all those who labor for love in forgotten spaces. These are maps that reimagine political maps as the body turned inside out.

The personal is political—if you will.

—Sharmistha Ray *New York* April 2018

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Introduction

The Archive of Industrial Debris

Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience [*Medium des Erlebten*], just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. —WALTER BENJAMIN, “Excavation and Memory,” 1932 (in *Selected Writings*, 2005)

What is a ruin, after all? It is a human construction abandoned to nature, and one of the allures of ruins in the city is that of wilderness: a place full of the promise of the unknown with all its epiphanies and dangers. Cities are built by men (and to a lesser extent, women), but they decay by nature, from earthquakes and hurricanes to the incremental processes of rot, erosion, rust, the microbial breakdown of concrete, stone, wood, and brick, the return of plants and animals making their own complex order that further dismantles the simple order of men. —REBECCA SOLNIT, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 2005

I have been digging: both through memory and through ruins. This digging is a practice of time travel, and it moves me between two overlapping habitations of the present. When I stand at the gate of Dhanraj Spinning and Weaving, Ltd., one of the last privately owned textile mills operating in Mumbai, I feel an eerie sense of disconnect. Along Ambedkar Road, under the flyover (overpass) construction, thick with the ringing and honking of traffic, I am in the urban present. Here, the air is heavy with smog, and the streets smell of exhaust and frying oil from the *dhabas* (roadside restau-



FIGURE I.1. The gate to Dhanraj Spinning and Weaving, Ltd.

rants) and chai stalls. People rush by on their way to work. Others move slowly as they carry heavy burdens on tired legs. A double-decker bus swings by and slows down; masses of people jump off and leap on. There is ongoing motion and a sense of urgency on the street.

But as I cross through the gate of Dhanraj, the world begins to shift. Chandan, the elderly North Indian security guard, smiles at me with recognition and waves me across this threshold between worlds. I walk down a dirt lane flanked by tall, crumbling stone walls. Vines push through the gaps that reveal a barren field to one side and a mill chimney to the other. It is quiet on this side of the gate. The traffic is muffled, and the airy corridor carries a cool breeze. This is one of the few places in the city where I walk alone on a road, save an occasional truck that rumbles through and reminds me that I am in a bustling city. I hear birds and, in the distance, the ducks that live by the small pond behind the main compound. When I draw near to the mill building, even the sun cannot penetrate the shady pathway, and I move into shadows. The canteen beside the entrance is serving chai, and several men I know sit on the wood benches by the door, resting their sweaty backs. They nod at me and I wave back: Raj, Dilip, Bhalchand, and



FIGURE 1.2. The Dhanraj ducks on the lane inside the mill compound.

Sudarshan. It's almost time for their shift to start: a shift at a functional textile mill in a city without functioning textile mills. They put down their cups and join me as we head up to the second floor, where the machines live. I can smell cool dirt and damp wood and old stone. I can hear the rumbling of machines above me and I climb the stairs in semidarkness. The noise draws me closer and closer as it becomes louder and louder . . .

I know this place now, but it took years before I encountered Dhanraj. I was not looking for enlivened spaces or for spaces of productivity: I was only looking for spaces of abandoned ruination, and those stories of abandoned ruination were everywhere. Down the road from Dhanraj, off the main thoroughfare of Ambedkar Road, sits the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum, Mumbai's oldest museum. Built in 1872, it is a museum of the city: a grand colonial structure now dedicated to the history, culture, and art of Mumbai. Early into my fieldwork, in December 2008, Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action and Research (PUKAR, a word that also means "to call out") opens an exhibit at the City Museum entitled *Girangaon—Kal, Aaj Aur Kal (Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow)*.¹ Part of the project involves providing cameras for the children of former



FIGURE 1.3. The Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum.
Photograph by Kabi Sherman.

textile mill workers — “Barefoot Researchers” — and asking them to document the central city neighborhoods they grew up in. The first time I wander through the second-floor exhibit, traces of the British Raj all around me, I marvel at the stories and pictures of loss and absence: the former industrial city, the mill land that once was, the *chawls* (tenement buildings) being torn down. The only way this exhibit can see the mill lands is as abandoned and already dead.

I walk through this exhibit feeling confused and disoriented. I was just in Dhanraj a few hours before. I was just with the workers while they ran the old machines. I just watched as they spun thread out of raw cotton. Only yesterday I sat with Manda in her chawl unit down the road and sipped chai while she told me her stories. Yet, the exhibit does not account for these pockets of productivity and vitality still scattered throughout the central city. These spaces are of the same city and of the same time: How can I reconcile the narratives displayed in the museum space and the experiences of Dhanraj workers down the street? Inside this exhibit I lose all sense of time.²

There is no doubt that Central Mumbai is currently undergoing de-industrialization and massive redevelopment. These are not new urban phenomena; however, while industrial decline is undoubtedly occurring at a rapid rate, low-level production continues, even as the contributions and concerns of these laborers are largely unseen by most urban residents. This book, then, emerges from an ethnographic puzzle: when I arrive in Mumbai I am told that there are no mills operating or workers working in the low-lying industrial buildings scattered through Central Mumbai's mill land neighborhoods. However, once I find Dhanraj, I also encounter a small and unrecognized community of mill workers who continue to work within Mumbai's semiformal industrial sector. The mill lands are characterized as completely abandoned because spaces like the PUKAR exhibit display only death and absence. Because of the seamlessness of these narrative spaces, the remaining mills are omitted from the many discussions and accounts of the city. This book asks what it means to be an active worker in an industry that is understood to be defunct. How do Dhanraj workers understand their identities as industrial workers in a "postindustrial" landscape? And what is achieved by denying the presence and continuing productivity of the lively ruin of Dhanraj?

The workers of Dhanraj answer these questions for me every day. Manda tells me how it feels to stand on her feet all day for years, winding thread the city believes is no longer produced in Mumbai. Sushila lays out her aches and pains, the accumulations of a lifetime of industrial bodily breakdown. Raj explains the mysterious negotiations between mill owners and union representatives—secretive meetings to determine the future of a city in flux. Sudarshan shows me how he balances mill work during the day and taxi driving at night—precarious, informal labor supplementing the once steady, now disappearing, future he bought into four decades ago. Kishan reveals how ethnicity-based tension, infusing city identity and politics, operates on the micro level of the mill. Through their storytelling, my Dhanraj informants remind me (and perhaps themselves) of the liveliness existing within spaces of perceived ruination.

Where do these stories live? I argue throughout this book that the mill land neighborhoods of Central Mumbai are an ethnographic archive of the city: a semipublic space of documents, artifacts, and stories, held by the workers inhabiting these still-breathing but slowly decaying spaces.³ An enlivened archival space that is "more fractious than cumulative, more a space of catachresis than catharsis" (Arondekar 2009, 171). I am not

the first ethnographer to invoke a concept usually reserved for historical work.⁴ In utilizing “the archive,” however, I am not attempting to organize and understand paper documents that sit outside a structured and curated space. Instead, I am seeking to expand the form of the archive in order to access an orientation of knowledge that has been disappeared or overlooked. Or, to borrow from the historian Antoinette Burton, I understand “archive” to be both discourse and reality, and I follow her call to read archives “ethnographically” (2003, 27). In following such a call, I push against it, as well: before I can read archives ethnographically, I must construct them ethnographically.

When the archive becomes a form of methodology, contemporary trends and phenomena emerge through alternative prisms. Central Mumbai may appear as a city in transition—the industrial making way for the postindustrial. However, through the ethnographic archive, the temporality of lively ruins pushes me to consider how the industrial still remains in the postindustrial. This is not a story of infrastructural shift; this is instead a story of embodied time and place. When we encounter global cities only through structural trends, we miss the liveliness of living *in* the global city. This book is an intervention and a challenge to this zoomed-out urban narrative: the challenge is to become lost in the city, lost in the experience of loss, and lost in the lives lived despite trends and expectations. It is an intervention made by swapping out the lens currently used in writing urban anthropology and instead beginning from the space of the ethnographic archive.

And so this book is an ethnographic archive of loss and life in the mill land neighborhoods of Mumbai: an exploration of lively ruination and anachronistic vitality. In archiving loss, this project emerges from both histories *of* loss and histories that *are* lost.⁵ Through this “archive of loss,” I call for the soothsaying potentiality of the archive, located in its absences or losses. In this way, I am not simply looking to fill gaps or produce a lost whole but instead emphasize the power of loss as generative and critical. At the same time, I am also invested in making certain people and places and stories more visible than others. These two moves are not necessarily contradictory when I operate within the analytic of the archive. I do not attempt to replace one story with another. I simply acknowledge the existence of multiple stories and reveal the power that positions them in uneven ways.⁶

Throughout this book I will act as an ethnographer-archivist, taking you, the reader, through the archives I have chosen. Like *Girangaon—Kal,*

Aaj Aur Kal, these archives are curated through interpretation.⁷ They are incomplete—limited by my placement, my perspective, my positionality. The archive holds power through these limitations. There is no way to know what has been lost and there is no way to know what was never there. The archive is a realm of secrets, and only some of these secrets can be told.⁸ But among these accessible secrets are stories of vitality, of survival, of presence: of life lived within and around the lively ruins of mill land Mumbai.

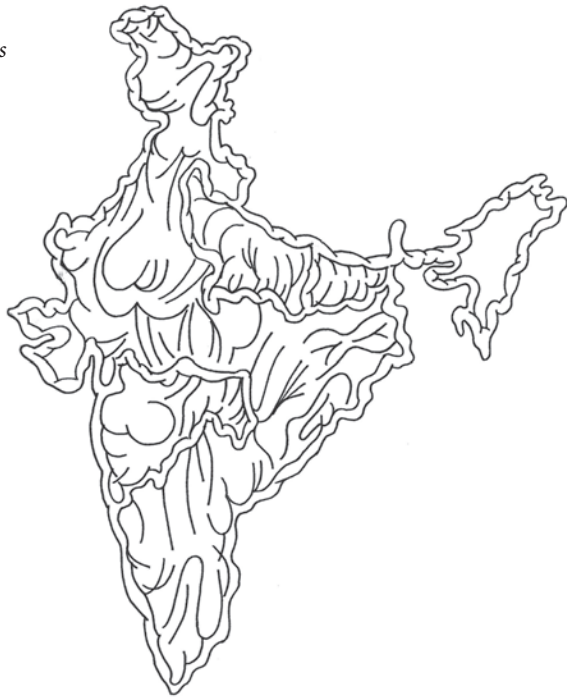
The Museum of Mill Land Mumbai: Notes on Narrative

I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination. —AMITAV GHOSH, *The Shadow Lines*, 1988

This book begins with the claim that official histories and master narratives, like *Girangaon—Kal*, *Aaj Aur Kal*, are straightforward and simplistic. This does not (necessarily) make them wrong, but it does make them intentional and strategic. Their goal is to produce stories that are easily circulated and seamlessly consumed. In claiming that visible histories of mill land Mumbai are akin to a museum, I argue that spaces like Dhanraj, then, are reflective of the archive—messy and chaotic lives and documents and records and spaces that contradict, expand, and interrupt the narrative of the museum. Throughout this ethnography I use the space of Dhanraj as both a challenge to and an expansion of the official museum history. The archive is a disruption. But these spaces of disruption are often unseen, and this lack of visibility allows museum stories to blanket the entrances to spaces where archives might be encountered. This ethnography is an exploration of these unseen histories of mill land Mumbai: the archives of a museum of loss.

But the basement archives lack the power of response if they are not first entered through the museum. And so here I present the standard (abridged) history of mill land development and the current crisis facing Dhanraj, as told through the framing of a museum. It tells several visible stories: these stories are the ones I interpret as “official,” “accepted,” and “understood.” I am not—in any way—attempting to *rewrite* this master narrative. It is important, it is well thought out, it helps us understand critical phenomena across the landscapes of our lives. But this is not the only way of seeing, engaging with, and understanding these landscapes, and this master narrative is incapable of illuminating the lively ruination of unseen, overlooked spaces. Museum narratives are necessarily simple. They are

FIGURE 1.4. Sharmistha Ray, *Intimate Geographies* (*Mapping India*), 11- $\frac{3}{4}$ × 12- $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, porous point black ink pen on Fabriano paper, 2018.



clear. They are accessible. But the archives tell additional stories: the ones that would muddy the museum. The ones that would throw the gallery exhibit into chaos and confusion. The ones that challenge not only the materials of the museum but also the very foundation of museum constructions.

For an outsider with an untrained eye, walking through the mill lands of Mumbai is an exercise in confusion: How do I *see* this area, seemingly so chaotic and unplanned? Spatially, Central Mumbai's neighborhoods stand beneath the shadows of the city's numerous flyovers and are barely visible from the highway. Because of this, it is possible to drive between downtown and the northern suburbs without ever seeing the mills, except for an occasional chimney jutting above the low-lying industrial mill compounds. In thinking about this cloistered spatiality, mapping the mill lands must also become an intentional and embodied engagement in place-making. Sharmistha Ray's maps, *Intimate Geographies*, are one such remapping exercise. This book is also a practice of remapping: remapping histories, remapping experience, remapping space. A practice of remapping that which is no longer visible.



FIGURE I.5.
Sharmistha Ray,
Intimate Geographies
(*Mapping Bombay*),
11-³/₄ × 12-³/₄ inches,
porous point black
ink pen on Fabriano
paper, 2018.

But the industry once had global visibility: the first textile mill, the Bombay Spinning Mill, was set up in 1854 in response to Britain's demand for cotton textiles.⁹ Wealthy Indian merchant families, who made fortunes trading with the British, were able to acquire mills on low-cost land leases (ranging from 100 to 999 years) from the colonial government, transforming the city from a trade hub into a major manufacturing center. By the 1930s, half the city's population was economically dependent on the industry, which continued to grow (Surve 2011).

By the early 1960s, the city had fifty-eight cotton textile mills employing more than 600,000 workers. But increasing international cotton production (primarily from Japanese-controlled, China-based mills) led to a decline in the demand placed on the Indian market. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the city's mill owners cut jobs and wages to keep up with this newly unstable market, and the textile industry found itself in crisis.¹⁰ This resulted in a massive, industry-wide strike from 1982 to 1983, known

as the Great Textile Strike. Most mills never recovered from the economic devastation of those years.¹¹

While the 1980s were known as a time of crisis, the 1990s became a decade of confusion. As much of the city's textile production came to a near standstill, the development laws lingering from colonial zoning legislation created a situation of stagnation. As it turned out, the mill land was "locked" and unavailable for any other manufacturing activities and future development. This situation grew into an urban planning dilemma for the city. First, the mill lands occupied six hundred conjoined acres in the middle of the city. This extensive patch of underutilized land created an obstacle for development in the heart of Mumbai. Second, the lack of access to the mill lands produced exorbitant property values in the city that discouraged investment and development. Third, development in Mumbai was limited by the city's location on a peninsula. Because of this, new businesses and other developments needed to be built to the north of the locked land. A lawyer representing the Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG) put the consequences of these factors into perspective for me:

What was unusual [about the industry] was that you had your prime economic activity within the heart of a city—so clearly not suitable from a planning perspective, but because cities in India are not planned in any organized way (they instead grow organically) you have these mill lands. And that's probably what gives them the kind of significance—even today, one hundred years later—is because of their location. We're not talking about industries on the periphery of a city, which is now being developed commercially. We're talking about industries in the heart of a city. And we're not talking about one plot or two plots. We're talking about six hundred acres of mill lands. . . . When Bombay grew as a city in the twentieth century, it grew around this industrial activity.

Eventually, these factors burdened Mumbai's development such that the government of India changed its position and acknowledged the need to free up the locked land, but how to unlock the land for development was controversial and involved two rounds of litigation.

The sale of mill land was and still is enmeshed in social and political controversy. Issues of lost labor, worker rights, environmental conservation, and the desire for open space complicated the ways in which development can (and will) take place. This crisis was first addressed among the various

structural adjustment changes occurring across India in 1991.¹² Emerging from these changes were the Development Control Rules (DCRs), specifically DCR-58, commonly known as the “one-third plan.” The original rule (DCR-58) stated that two-thirds of the land area must be turned over to the state (one-third for open space and one-third for low-income housing). The remaining one-third could be retained by owners and developers and used as they saw fit. However, both the government-controlled National Textile Corporation mills and private mill owners argued that this formula, when properly employed, applied only to *unused* land, free from industrial structures. This interpretation implied that, if any of the mill land was presently built upon, that land would be excluded from the formula and retained by the owner. Under this interpretation, the land available for open space and low-income housing was insignificant because mills were typically low-lying structures occupying a substantial part of the land area in question. To put it simply, open space essentially didn’t exist in the congested mill lands. If this formula were applied only to those few pockets of open land, there would be no real public purpose that could be served, either for green space or for public housing. The next decade resulted in several major court cases and virtually no substantial development.

In 2001, following several rounds of litigation, the city government finally amended the rule: DCR-58 became DCR-58 (I), which stated: “Only land that is vacant on mill properties—that is with no built-up structure—would be divided by the one-third formula.” Following this alteration, mill owners could retain the majority of their land, as the area claimed by the city and former workers was limited to 6 to 10 percent, as opposed to two-thirds, of the mill land. This defeat was doubly devastating for the petitioners in favor of the one-third formula, as the plan was believed to be the salvation for a city often understood as dangerously overcrowded and completely lacking in open space. At a roundtable organized for World Health Day, Pankaj Joshi of the Urban Development and Research Institute explained: “Only 6 percent of the total land in the city [of Mumbai] is made up of open public spaces. Out of this, 45 percent is partially or completely encroached upon. A citizen of Mumbai gets 1.95 square meters of open space against the international standard of 11 square meters per person.” In one of the most congested areas of the world, the one-third plan had the potential to alleviate the density, pollution, and infrastructural strain placed on the central city. And yet private interests got in the way.

A lawyer representing the BEAG explained to me:

I think what really brought the matter to life for us was knowing what could have been, had the result been the other way. And we knew it firsthand because we met with them [the planners], we saw their blueprints, we saw their reports. And if those blue prints of potential urban planning of the mill lands had been put into effect and implemented, it really would have made a difference to that part of Bombay, which is otherwise extremely congested, very chaotic, and—because it's in such a strategic location—could have really provided solutions to infrastructure problems that Bombay, as a city, faces. Transportation issues, but also most importantly, parks and green space. And that is the potential that the mill lands had for the city. And therefore, having had an insight, when we lost, we knew that it was not just losing a legal argument, but also a potential would be lost for all times to come.

This sense of colossal loss was shared unanimously by those engaged in defending the one-third plan, whether from the perspective of environmental concerns, working-class housing issues, or the loss of architectural heritage. In many ways, this ruling was seen as the beginning of the end for the possible creation of a more sustainable city.

By 2003, a combination of rising real estate costs and the supposed stability of DCR-58 (I) placed mill owners in a prime position to sell their land for enormous profits. However, a decade of court cases and ambiguous legal interpretations resulted in dramatic uncertainty as to the actual status of the land and the risk involved in selling, renovating, razing, and rebuilding mill lands.¹³ This ambiguity stalled the activity of some landowners hoping to turn major profits in the wake of industry's decline.

For Dhanraj, this story is particularly complicated.¹⁴ The owners of Dhanraj, the Lal family, entered into a partnership with the development company Mahindra Lifespaces in 1995.¹⁵ However, Mahindra then outwardly claimed that its dedication to transparency and hyperlegality did not allow it to engage in extralegal business, which was common in the mill land district. This led to Mahindra stalling development of the compound and Dhanraj attempting to extricate itself from any legal partnership in court. At the end of my long-term fieldwork, in 2012, the company was locked in a court battle with Dhanraj; as a result, no development could proceed until all the workers retired and were paid sizable settlements.¹⁶ This situation resulted in a skeleton workforce running a seemingly de-

cayed and unproductive mill. From the bustling sidewalk running along Ambedkar Road, Dhanraj looks like just another boarded-up, abandoned mill, awaiting the development plans of Mahindra Lifespaces.

An Archive of Lively Ruination: Notes on Time

People are collecting found objects snatched off the literal or metaphorical side of the road. Things that have dropped out of the loop or have been left sagging somewhere are dragged home as if they are literal residues of past dreaming practices.

The snatching practice mixes a longing for a real world (or something) with the consumer's little dream of spying a gem or tripping over a bargain. And in the mix, all kinds of other things are happening, too.—KATHLEEN STEWART, *Ordinary Affects*, 2007

According to the museum narrative, Dhanraj industrial production is no more. But Dhanraj industrial production is *not* over, even if the museum narrative has convinced the city that it is. Walking through the gate to the mill compound is like crossing over into another time: life in the mill moves slowly in dimly lit spaces, seemingly unaware of the fast pace and bright lights of the city around it. But the mill is not a relic from the past: while Dhanraj may invoke a sense of pastness, this orientation toward ruin forecloses our ability to engage it as a lively and vital space of modernity.¹⁷ This is a crisis of temporality: at the gate of Dhanraj, diverse planes of time and space merge in a single moment and place, shaping the meaning of work and life that unfolds within the mill compound. This ruinous space is an allegory for our present moment, which appears industrial and post-industrial, simultaneously—an alternative “now,” in contrast to shifting economies and skylines outside the compound gate.¹⁸

I can *see* this collision of alternative times.

If I choose to pay attention. . . .

So how does an ethnographer-archivist pay attention? From the street, Dhanraj appears to be nothing more than a semi-abandoned textile mill, in the process of demolition and redevelopment. But once inside its walls, I find myself in a crucible of temporal reimagining. This mill, in its ruination, is an uncanny space and—if we (you as my reader, me as your ethnographer-archivist) listen—it has much to tell us about the present and the future. Dhanraj is an uncanny ruin because it is both a (seeming) leftover of modernity and its counterpart (a production *of* modernity)—the mill is a collision of multiple modernities.¹⁹ Throughout this ethnogra-

phy, I show how Dhanraj is a lens through which to challenge, reimagine, and alter how the present moment we *think* we find ourselves in speaks to the future. But in order to take such a thought experiment seriously, we must reimagine how we can see the world. It is difficult to see zombified economic and social spaces such as Dhanraj because they defy our expectations of progress, of time, of modernity. They lie outside what we think we know of the world.

Economic history is usually narrated by eras: industrial capitalism and postindustrial capitalism, liberalism and the age of the neoliberal.²⁰ One gives way to another, and the world changes through acts of assigning labels as a practice of movement. But does this temporal progression actually map onto the materiality of the everyday? There is a disconnect between the naming of time and the mapping of time-names onto the material, enlivened world. This practice makes it very difficult to see (and then to narrate, to make sense of) anachronistic spaces like Dhanraj.

As both a place and an idea, Dhanraj is *present*: I have been there, I return often as a reminder. It is and continues to be *real*. But it is also dying: an ongoing and incomplete process of decay and transformation.

There is a double anachronism here:

Dhanraj is alive, but it will die soon.

Also Dhanraj is already dead.

Therefore, Dhanraj is a sort of death that is deeply alive: a space of alternative life, a life outside of language. What do we do with this zombified place, both alive and undead? Both decaying and vital, ruinous and lively? A location where the past becomes alive because it *is* still alive? Instead of thinking about liveliness as generative, I propose a form of lively ruination and anachronistic vitality. Life exists on multiple planes, and in the mill lands, life and loss envelop each other in a nonlinear form. Therefore, Dhanraj is a dialectical space of life and loss; I thus employ a wider lens through which to grapple with this world I find myself in because while I write this ethnography in the time of the “postindustrial,” I simultaneously attend to what this means for people still living industrial lives.

I propose Dhanraj provides a nonlinear timeline of decay: while de-industrial narratives show that the global collapse of industrial production has already happened, attention paid to spaces of local-level industrial production (like Dhanraj) reveals a discordant collision of time and production. Narratives of collapse and practices of local-level production