

and cotton trades. The chapter's provocative claim, that this teamwork opened the roads for the "coolie" trade or the importation of Chinese labor into the U.S., is only one of many historical relays that Lowe traces here (98).

Chapter 4 is a study of Hong Kong as a test case for colonial governmentality. Citing official correspondence from the 1840s, Lowe demonstrates that the proponents of the newly established Crown Colony parsed the meaning of "freedom" in such a way as to justify the so-called "free" port that allowed the crown unrestricted access and authority while keeping its subjects in a state of constant surveillance and biopolitical control. Here, Lowe contends that intimacy, as a site of regulation and the object of colonial power, is a dress rehearsal for a new model of governance that allows the contradiction between liberal freedom at home and despotism abroad (a stance that J. S. Mill advocated openly) to become enshrined in the colonial state (118).

In the fifth and final chapter, Lowe discusses *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, a contemporary work of art by Yinka Shonibare that mirrors Lowe's own attempt at a "history of the present" (136). When the book returns to the big questions about the nature of historical study and the relationship between its methods and its political agendas, Hegel takes center stage as one thinker whose historical models have evaded postcolonial scrutiny. Then comes Marx, whose "historical and dialectical overcoming of slavery by freedom," Lowe asserts, "left no trace of slavery's role in the becoming of modern Europe" (151). Lowe follows up with C. L. R. James and W. E. B. Du Bois as better models for the historiography of "racial capitalism" (149–156). They, by placing the Haitian Revolution and slavery, respectively, at the center of historical accounts, exceeded the very terms of development that Hegel and Marx drew out for the subjects of slavery in the Western Hemisphere.

The book, by describing the old diasporas constituted by slavery and bondage as Europe's "others," remains Eurocentric. Perhaps a more careful reading of the primary accounts and official records from the Asian sectors might have allowed some embedded Chinese and South Asian perspectives to emerge. In conclusion, Lowe's book is still a persuasive account of how the abstract promises of abolition, emancipation, free wage labor, and free trade did not contradict colonial rule and slavery but rather accommodated them.

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LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH, IVAN GASKELL, SARA SCHECHNER, and SARAH ANNE CARTER. *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects*. With photographs by SAMANTHA S. B. VAN GERBIG. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xvii, 259. \$39.95.

The past few years have seen the publication of several textbooks on how history can be written through the use of objects and how material culture has come to be an important facet of the discipline of history. By and large these books deal with either theory or with specific bodies

of research. *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects* is instead a more hands-on engagement with objects derived from a project undertaken in 2011 by the four authors—Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner, and Sarah Anne Carter—and a group of students in collaboration with the Harvard University Museums. The outcome was an exhibition and a series of activities involving academics, students, and museums. The resulting book is a refreshing analysis that reflects upon how objects create, shape, and sometimes challenge knowledge. Developing an argument long established in the history of science, the authors see objects as active participants and agents in the shaping of disciplines ranging from natural history to anthropology, from ethnography to history. Today we tend to think of academic disciplines in a rather abstract way, but as the Harvard museums show, since the late eighteenth century their structuring, their theories, and their educational missions have been (and to a certain extent still are) based on the material engagement with "things."

The book is divided into four parts, the first of which, entitled "Things in Place," charts the way in which knowledge has been formed and often institutionalized through the gathering (including collecting, pilfering, donating, and excavating) of material things. We find that generations of more or less celebrated male academics and their oftentimes uncelebrated wives literally spent their lives collecting specimens, digging out shards, and buying and amassing research and teaching collections. Yet these things came with stories and began to acquire further meaning when set in relation to other things. The first part of the book therefore shows how collections and disciplines (natural history, anthropology and archaeology, books and manuscripts, art, science and medicine, and history) came to be established and differentiated through the categorization of objects.

"Things Unplaced," a second section of the exhibition and book, aims at challenging established and now widely accepted categorizations. The authors consider how objects allow us to see the connections between different bodies of knowledge and glimpse disciplinary fault lines. Students and readers are asked to question established narratives into which things are slotted. This is sometimes achieved by drawing on the biography of things and how they were collected by museums. In other cases it is accomplished, as for example with a Mexican tortilla collected in 1897 and now part of the Economic Herbarium of Oakes Ames, Harvard University Herbaria, by asking what this object might be about: is it about grains, about food, nutritional value, genetics, ethnography, race, or any of the above? And what does it mean to position such a tortilla in a specific collection and in juxtaposition with a precise set of things?

The unraveling of narratives and the questioning of classification, disciplinary boundaries, and the division of museum collections are further developed in the third exercise/section, "Things out of Place." Objects were sent as "guests" from one collection to another. The authors here clarify that the temporary presence of guest objects was aimed to "be disruptive, but not to ridicule its host

collection” (134). For instance, they sent a bladder stone to the Mineral Hall of the Harvard Museum of Natural History, and an artist’s palette was placed among the instruments as part of the Collection of Historic Scientific Instruments. Particularly significant is the fact that students also disrupted narratives of time, which often bundle together objects, and questioned the Western origin of much of the systematic disciplinary engagement in universities today.

In the final exercise performed by students, “Things in Stories—Stories in Things,” the authors make the important point that objects are often marginal in historical narratives or “play at best a supporting role” (159). What kind of stories emerge if instead we put objects at the core of analysis? The narratives that objects create seem to cut across categories and escape the disciplinary strait-jacket to which they were assigned perhaps a century or two ago. The authors come full circle to reflect creatively on how material things served to form knowledge over time and how the exhibition/exercise served to produce more nuanced and interdisciplinary narratives of wide resonance today.

Tangible Things is a creative book and an experiment that will surely inspire students and colleagues to reflect not just on “things” per se but also on the clusters, the assemblages, and the heavy editing that they have been subjected to. As the book and companion website show, the Harvard collections allow for remarkable breadth that can hardly be reproduced with other, more modest university or public collections. The book provides, however, if not a model, surely a challenge that is engagingly recounted and beautifully illustrated.

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RICHARD BESSEL. *Violence: A Modern Obsession*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015. Pp. 373. £20.00.

Theologians, anthropologists, sociologists, political theorists, philosophers, psychologists, even biologists have long pondered the causes, effects, and meaning of violence in the hope of diminishing its power over our lives. Although historians have not shied away from detailing the role of violence in specific contexts, they have been reluctant to hazard global accounts of its persistent role in the larger story of human development. The distinguished British historian Richard Bessel, who began his career in the 1980s writing about Nazi political violence, has now ventured to do so in a wide-ranging, thoughtful, and richly synthetic study that demonstrates the value of a historical approach to a topic that inevitably cuts across disciplinary boundaries. Although Bessel focuses mostly on the European and American contexts, with only passing glances elsewhere, he provides ample nourishment for more general ruminations on the role(s) of violence in human affairs.

Or more precisely, he ruminates on the changing attitudes that seem to have occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. For although Bessel pays considerable attention to actual violent behavior in many different

contexts, he remains agnostic about aggregate trends, refusing to choose between the conventional wisdom that violent trends are rising and the claims to the contrary of such revisionists as Steven Pinker. Instead, Bessel’s primary focus is on the more manageable issue of different responses to violence and their rationale. Exceptions aside, he argues that with alarm over its costs spreading widely, violence has become a dominant “obsession” of our time. Devoting individual chapters to violence as a spectacle, a religious issue, an accompaniment to revolution, a tool of politics, an effect of warfare, a victimizer of women and children, an instrument and target of social control, and a stimulus to commemoration, Bessel ventures several arguments to explain the reasons for our intensified preoccupation with violence in all of these various contexts. Prime among these is the shock of mega-violence in the first half of the last century, when much of the allegedly civilized world was reduced to “bloodlands” of unspeakable horror for soldiers and civilians alike. In the second half of the century, most of these blighted areas of the globe enjoyed something of a respite—somehow escaping the nuclear apocalypse threatened by the Cold War—although other sections of the world did not, as the genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia and the unfolding catastrophe in Syria make clear. In addition to the bitter lessons of what might be called the West’s early-twentieth-century “uncivilizing process,” Bessel argues that the economic boom of the postwar years gave more people than ever before a stake in preserving the peace, a goal abetted by the rise of more stable state structures able to contain civil unrest. In addition, improvements in life expectancy, medical treatment, and public health measures meant that the value of life in general went up, and with it a concomitant intolerance for life’s premature termination. The enhanced position of women in modern societies also decreased acceptance of the routinized violence visited on them in more traditional contexts, a benign transformation later extended, although Bessel neglects to foreground it, to sexual minorities. He also speculates that the reduced role of the military in societies with small professional armies waging war largely through sophisticated impersonal technologies dimmed the aura surrounding the warrior’s sacrificial valor. No less important, Bessel speculates, in increasing sensitivity to the costs of violence is extended coverage by the media, which is able to disseminate non-sanitized, uncensored images of violence’s actual effects.

Bessel, however, resists a Whiggish history of progress in either the diminished prevalence of violence in one form or another or the growing dismay at its resilience. He cites the sociologist Heinrich Popitz’s paradoxical insight that “social order is a necessary condition for containing violence—violence is a necessary condition for maintaining social order” (199). The policing function of the state, Bessel shows, has only recently been directed toward the protection of the public and employed to intervene in cases of interpersonal violence. Often policing has been used instead to suppress protest movements, including union organizing. And, of course, in the name of security, we—and here the collective pronoun has to be