

Jessica Yirush Stern. *The Lives in Objects: Native Americans, British Colonists, and Cultures of Labor and Exchange in the Southeast.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 268 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-3147-9.

Reviewed by Jay Donis (Lehigh)

Published on H-War (October, 2019)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The Lives in Objects prefers the view of the forest to the trees to frame an engaging examination of the economic exchanges between “Southeastern Indians” and the British in southeastern North America between the late seventeenth century and the Anglo-Cherokee War of 1759-61. Rather than focus on discrete incidents of trade or gift giving, Stern describes the larger models of exchange used by both cultures while cleverly incorporating the story of objects before and after they changed hands. The book also examines the economic debates occurring within both English and Southeastern Indian cultures at the time. Rather than presenting a story of cultural change, Stern argues that competing ideas and changing labor practices did not fragment Native or British societies during this period, nor did either culture become dependent on or assimilated by the other.

The book inserts itself into a significant number of historiographical arguments. Primarily, Stern takes issue with the “Native gift/British commodity duality” advocated by a number of scholars (p. 1). The author situates her work against those who suggest “Native Americans were not fluent in the economic parlance of European market transactions.” Stern is right to put forward “a matrix that addresses more attributes than whether there was an existing relationship between the

two parties bequeathing goods” (p. 2). This fundamental premise of the book is successfully argued. She also reorients scholarly understanding of exchange in the Southeast by pointing out that the British, more so than the Indians, appeared “uncomfortable with commodity exchange” (p. 1). Another key theme Stern applies to both Indians and Europeans is “the supposition that objects [that] wove their way through the continent and over the Atlantic were not inert material” (p. 3). Reminiscent of Virginia DeJohn Anderson’s *Creatures of Empire* (2004), Stern adroitly uses the life cycle of objects to uncover how goods could potentially be effective tools of control. However, where the domestic animals studied by Anderson succeeded to push Indians toward British ways, in Stern’s account neither the British or Indians successfully leveraged commodities or gifts to control the others’ actions.

The text also raises a number of other arguments specific to each culture. Stern contends that for Natives, an influx of European goods did not lead to “the atrophy of skills needed to sustain a self-reliant society,” but actually led to “new avenues of creativity” (p. 5). In addition, she counters scholars who imply that the Atlantic trade led to the breakdown of “indigenous political structures” and an accompanying shift from communalism to

individualism by arguing that “cultures are resilient” (p. 11). For the British, this study “argues that ... settlers in South Carolina and Georgia shared and forged a cultural language about economic practices and policies” (p. 9) and “reveal[s] how traditional economic ideologies continued to influence government officials and merchants alike” (p. 7). Finally, Stern asserts that “the South based its conceptions of freedom on the right to control and exploit the labor of others, whether directly through slavery or indirectly through gifts and regulations” (p. 15). All of these arguments are plausible, but periodically disappear throughout the text.

Chapter 1, “Production,” analyzes objects before their exchange. The production of goods reveals a significant cultural difference between Natives and the British. The British prioritized individual ability to command and produce goods, while Natives emphasized communal production. Yet, even this cleavage was complicated by the fact that the British did not value all labor the same, and “new labor realities of the deerskin trade” unsettled Indian cultures by encouraging “individual and nuclear family labor over communal labor” (p. 20). Producing goods in the Atlantic economy altered Native male, and some female, labor patterns, first in capturing slaves and then in capturing and processing deer hides. Despite the alteration in male labor patterns, Stern writes, “the realm of agriculture remained largely untouched” and Natives viewed their communities through these communal and agricultural traditions rather than the new production methods. As for the British, their society’s celebration of individualism meant creating opportunities for poor members of society to improve their economic prospects, but not necessarily increased social status. While South Carolina’s assembly gained power over the proprietors rather early on, “all of the members ... owned a substantial amount of land and numerous slaves” (p. 14). Similarly, Georgia’s trustees wanted to improve the material conditions of the poor, but did not want to promote democracy and

denied “colonists a chance to participate in government” (p. 40). The promise of British liberty and social status based on the labor of an individual conflicted with the desire of the wealthy to stay in power by denying that power to other Englishmen.

Continuing to the first part of the exchange models, “Commodity Exchange,” Stern establishes different arguments for the different cultures. For Indians, “postcontact leaders emphasized their ability to protect their communities by enlarging their economic opportunities” (p. 46). At the same time, British “colonial authorities insisted on the regulations that historians mistakenly attribute solely to Native American pressure” (p. 49). A notable turning point in the British approach to trade occurred after the Yamasee War when colonial leaders increased regulations in an attempt to erase free trade. As Stern writes, “settlers often referred to foreigners and traders in the same breath as enemies of the British colonies” (p. 60). This othering of British traders by British settlers reflected the literal instability of a trader’s lifestyle and the fact that merchants were not necessarily landowners. Yet traders often embraced many of the regulations crafted after the Yamasee War and “some traders cast themselves as extensions of the empire” (p. 67). Leaders in Indian towns also embraced the regulations (p. 49). Furthermore, town leaders tried to influence trade by securing an Indian trader to set up shop or by facilitating a large deal. However, it remains unclear how successfully town leaders increased their power or directed trading opportunities since “postcontact leaders used persuasion” rather than coercion (p. 86) and the majority of Indians individually took their skins to a factory or could trade clandestinely in the woods (p. 81). Stern concludes the chapter by reiterating that the “ordinary” Native or colonist “forged ahead toward a more modern economic model” while leaders tried to “hobble them” (p. 92).

In the third chapter, “Gift Exchange,” the author shows how each side understood gift giving and what each side hoped to get out of it. Both Indians and the British understood that, unlike commodities that became the owners’ property, gifts entailed obligations in a hierarchical, instead of reciprocal, relationship (p. 94). British leaders bestowed guns, powder, and shot on Natives to “co-opt the Southeastern Indians as British agents,” while Indians used gifts to “claim jurisdiction over land” (pp. 95-96). Gifts served as a way to assimilate foreigners and both Indians and the British used gifts to assert their authority over the other. In addition, gifts allowed the giver to comment on the purpose of the gift, explicitly declaring the obligation expected of the receiver. However, as Stern points out, “Because gifts and commodities often looked the same, it was incumbent on the giver to make their differences known” (p. 103). Whereas Stern clearly delineates gift exchange from commodity exchange earlier in the book, in this chapter she explores how one could blend into the other and muddy the whole process. This chapter also reiterates British hypocrisy caused by their notion of cultural superiority and their struggle to force Indians to acknowledge a hierarchical relationship. Stern writes that British colonists believed “one could not use a gift contrary to the wishes of the giver” (p. 107), but South Carolina officials codified the purposeful disregard of Native gifts by turning them back “into commodities” (p. 118). Likewise, Indians often failed to use gifts as intended, because “once those gifts were installed in their recipient’s home, their meaning and objectives were often lost” (p. 120).

The final chapter dovetails nicely with the conclusions reached in chapter 3 about gifts and sees Stern at her most effective. The fourth chapter presents the reader with a single argument that spans each culture: “both Britons and Southeastern Indians remanufactured foreign goods before fully integrating them in their society, thereby creating the illusion that foreign commodities were not so foreign after all” (p. 122). In

particular, the author focuses on the use of British textiles in Indian communities and the deerskins that moved to British communities. Just as both cultures ignored the larger implications of gifts, they rejected any cultural baggage attached to commodities. Leaning into the idea that the distinction between gifts and commodities became less clear over time, Stern contends that their conflation led Southeastern Indians to become “hard-nosed negotiators” (p. 147). Stern shows how Native consumption of British commodities reveals indigenous savvy in the Atlantic market economy. Indians did not passively accept any European goods offered by traders, but actively shaped which products they acquired. In addition, Stern notes that Native tastes could change in response to non-economic stimuli, theorizing that a once sought-after good, blue stroud, lost its value after the British continually presented it to Indians who transported goods. In sum, the domestication of foreign goods indicated that both sides could unite in commodity exchange but preferred to keep separate cultural identities and failed to assimilate the other.

Stern’s broad approach succeeds overall but not without certain drawbacks. The author convinces the reader that the Natives and British drew on substantial cultural overlap to engage in both gift and commodity exchange. And, despite the similarities, clear cultural differences appeared between the societies that could, but did not necessarily prevent future collaboration. Stern’s argument of cultural continuity is less successful since the book’s expansive frame naturally guides the reader away from instances of intercultural tension. Signs of social strain appear in every chapter, but the author’s choice to view Natives as a single “Southeastern Indian” culture submerges these pressures. For example, the town leader’s role included securing “the fairest trading terms for their townsmen” (p. 161), but any Indian could, and often did, buy and sell directly with British settlers and traders (p. 160). Along the leader/non-leader line, Stern curiously left out treaties, or

rather the gift-giving and redistribution aspect of treaties. Incorporating treaty aims and results would surely help in assessing the persuasive capabilities of leaders on both sides and the success or failure of British attempts to influence Native societies through gift giving. Similarly, despite its preference for the forest-for-the-trees approach, the book is virtually silent on the larger geopolitical context of Spanish and French trade relations with Southeastern Indians despite the direct economic competition they provided to the British.

One final issue is Stern's insistence that "trade came first, and it came quite easily," as opposed to the many historians who believe gift giving "was the first form of exchange to bridge cultures in North America" (p. 49). The author's passion to disprove the gift-first theory is welcome but ends up sending mixed signals. For example, one of her concluding points is that "British settlers and Southeastern Indians approached one another with a repertoire of social and asocial exchanges" (p. 154). It should not be controversial to state that Indians possessed the concept of gift giving as well as trade before contact with Europeans. While Indians on the coast first engaged European explorers via trades, her evidence suggests that sixteenth-century ancestors of "Southeastern Indians" further inland first engaged in gift giving (p. 97). In fact, the gift giving by Natives to Hernando de Soto's *entrada* confirm Stern's contention that "gifts of hospitality marked one party as the outsider and the other as the insider" (p. 97). In any case, Stern's book effectively intervenes in a number of scholarly debates and is sure to spark future studies about the effects of trade within specific Native societies, the power of Atlantic economic networks, and the strength of indigenous resistance to British colonialism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Jay Donis. Review of Stern, Jessica Yirush. *The Lives in Objects: Native Americans, British Colonists, and Cultures of Labor and Exchange in the Southeast*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53935>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.