

**Lisa Lowe**, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5875-6 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-8223-5863-3 (cloth)

On the cover of Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents* an image of Yinka Shonibare's public sculpture "Nelson's Ship in a Bottle" is a vivid announcement of what lies inside the book: a deftly articulated model of the "history of the present"<sup>1</sup> that inspires wonder at how historical knowledge is formed. Shonibare's artwork – a large glass bottle that, in 2010, lay on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square in London containing a replica of the HMS Victory (the ship on which Nelson died after the battle of Trafalgar in 1805)<sup>2</sup> – provokes the public imagination far beyond the battle that the Square memorializes. Its colourful sails are fashioned from fabrics whose designs, based on Indonesian batiks, have been appropriated and mass-produced by the Dutch and British and exported to West Africa, where they gained mass popularity as clothing (p.136). These fabrics recall the intercontinental journeys undertaken during the Age of Imperialism that continue to resonate with the dominant contemporary narrative, including the transportation of both goods and peoples vital to the British empire's economy of trade, indentured migration, and slavery. Distorted behind the curved glass of its container, the ship presents an image of history that shifts, magnifies, and obscures the many articulations that compose Victory's presentation, challenging the conceit of the heroic narrative on display in its neighbour, Nelson's Column (1843). In *Intimacies*, Lowe similarly challenges the monument of dominant historiography and its inevitability, bringing to light its legacies of violence as they are both reproduced and obscured by contemporary liberal humanist institutions, discourses, and practices.

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<sup>1</sup> "History of the present" or "what Michel Foucault has discussed as a historical ontology of ourselves" describes Lowe's genealogical method. Her analysis "does not accept given categories and concepts as fixed or constant, but rather takes as its work the inquiry into how those categories became established as given, and with what effects" (p.3).

<sup>2</sup> See Ann Jones' blog, *Image Object Text*, for images: <https://imageobjecttext.com/2012/09/16/sailing-by> (last accessed 17 April 2020).

To build a ship in a bottle, the artist must collapse the ship's sails, gently ease it through the bottle neck, untangle the many threads attached to each part, then re-construct each mast and sail one by one by drawing on the disentangled threads. Inside the bottle the ship is the same object that was once on the outside. However, now it has undergone a complete re-articulation of the processes that created it, while our view of the object is adjusted by the optical effects of the bottle glass. As Lowe writes, "only by defamiliarizing both the object of the past and the established methods for apprehending that object do we make possible alternative forms of knowing, thinking, and being" (p.137). Lowe applies considerable patience and perception to the research and re-articulation of historical stories by attending to obfuscated and displaced relationships in the colonial archive, reconnecting this archive with the cultural products of liberalism that have traditionally disavowed their intimate entanglements with empire. She examines both primary archival documents, including court transcripts, letters, and ledgers, and various texts that she calls "liberal genres" – autobiography, novel, and political philosophy – reuniting the colonial imperatives shared by diverse aesthetic forms (p.70). Her unique interdisciplinary method reveals how global capitalism and its precedent, Empire, operate to discipline and organize peoples, places, and the presentation of historical knowledge and limit "what can be thought and imagined" to a concept of liberal humanism premised on progress and redemption yet contingent on the continued subjugation of its subjects (p.137).

Lowe begins from a multivalent interpretation of "intimacy" that reveals the restrictions of the common liberal meaning of intimacy as restricted to interiority, private property, and individual self-possession. Dominant formulations of intimacy maintain the injunctions that keep different groups of (colonized) peoples separated and individuals isolated from identification with collectivities. Lowe recognizes that the boundaries and divisions enforced by administrators and recorded in the colonial archive indicate the presence of the very intimacies these administrators were attempting to subdue. Proximities and affinities between captured workers that emerge from necessities of survival give rise to the very "political, sexual, intellectual collaborations, subaltern revolts and uprisings", that the colonizer fears (p.35). Lowe locates the potential for these intimacies in four key entanglements: racialization, the self-made imperial

subject, and the transition from slavery to freedom; indentured labor, colonial commodities, and industrialization; kinship structures, gender relations, and the initiation of free trade; and collective rebellion and the establishment of liberal democracy through representational government. By disentangling these threads Lowe reveals their interdependencies and rearticulates the dominant narratives of liberal modernity.

A brief example is Lowe's close reading of the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustvus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), framing the autobiography as the "liberal genre par excellence" as it evidences an individual's due achievement of personal liberty through moral education, religious faith, and civilization (p.46). By entering the book into a constellation with contemporaneous British and American autobiographical works, abolitionist interest in the Sierra Leone Resettlement Project (1787-91), and colonial dispossession, Christianization, and subordination of Indigenous peoples of the Americas, she plucks at the diverse global threads of investment in the emancipation narrative. For whom is this story told? What does its publication achieve? What potential intimacies lie hidden in its pages that have been obscured by the powerful stories of abolition, colonization, and individualist freedom that appropriate it? Lowe exposes both the abiding liberal appetite for stories of individual emancipation and the impossibility of these narratives to resolve all the contradictions of slavery.

Lowe also attends to the novel *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray (1847-48) with keen attention to the political forces that produce both the conditions for the novel's narrative and the commodities that occupy the domestic interiors in which the drama takes place. Lowe approaches the novel first through reading archives of British parliamentary investigations into the activities of the East India Company, concluding that tea, chintz, and silk belie their conditions of production, ultimately tracing the intimate relationship between the transformation of the Company from "economic monopoly to colonial state" (p.79) (manifesting Britain's imperial dominance) and the formation of a quintessential British self-concept (as nothing without tea). The interpretive method Lowe employs to read *Vanity Fair* is an excavation of the intimacies of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas as they are both expressed and obscured in

the ubiquitous objects that established the scenes of Victorian England and its colonies. Lowe's goal is not to fill in the gaps or recover the erasures in the historical archive; instead she suggests that novels such as Thackeray's invite us to inquire into the common operations and materials that form our environment and work to naturalize the absence of histories of slavery, indentured labor, and colonial violence. Beyond these two examples, Lowe also reads the work of C.L.R. James, W.E.B. DuBois, and John Stuart Mill alongside the Haitian Revolution, 19<sup>th</sup> century British and Chinese trade practices and ordinances, and more. The text challenges liberal linear analytics and temporalities by centering geographic entanglements and alternative modes of freedom.

Shonibare says of his artistic practice that he wants his "formal strategy to be part of the meaning of the work".<sup>3</sup> Like Shonibare's sculpture, Lowe's formal strategies of reading and interpretation compose the meaning and application of *Intimacies* as she shows us how to circumvent the limitations of "what-can-be-known" ordained by liberal disciplines of inquiry. Lowe's methodology attends to matters that are unavailable to the methods of history and social science, revealing that the dominant ways of reading aesthetic strategies of liberal humanist archives and literary genres perpetuate the same assumptions of a received genealogy of the "human" (p.175). When we read across these genres with an eye to the liberal organization of knowledge, we have the capacity to imagine alternative ways of reading, knowing, and being. *Intimacies* provides an alternate genealogy of modern liberalism itself that takes into account both its promises of rights and freedoms and its simultaneous investments in forms of subjection and governance that hold these liberties in reserve for a chosen few.

Looking up at Shonibare's model of the HMS Victory from the pavement of Trafalgar Square, viewers miss the slight representation of the waters on which the original vessel sailed, "that dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States", that W.E.B. Du Bois (quoted on p.174) alludes to in his epic narrative of antislavery history *Black Reconstruction in America*

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<sup>3</sup> See Art21's film, "Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA): *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voEgmpqKxo> (last accessed 17 April 2020).

(1935). Recognizing that these international intimacies are beyond the scope of Du Bois' crucial racial and economic analysis of US slavery and capitalism, Lowe takes up the task of attending to this "vast sea of human labor" in the grammar of a "*past conditional temporality*" (p.175). *Intimacies* does not attempt to represent missing narratives or rebuild history by filling in its gaps; instead Lowe insists that we attend to the absences in the archive as a cipher for connections and possibilities that could have been. Reading for "what could have been" returns the unthought to history, imagines a more complicated trajectory of how we got to where we are now, and removes the inevitability of a future mapped by the traditions of liberal humanism (p.40). *Intimacies* is a model of reading, writing, and thinking that attends to the possibilities of what might have been and what yet could be.<sup>4</sup>

*Hadley Howes*  
*Cultural Studies*  
*Queen's University*  
*19heh2@queensu.ca*

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa Lowe presented the 2017 *Antipode* Lecture at the American Association of Geographers' annual meeting in Boston, MA. You can watch a film of the lecture, "Archives, Ports, Museums", and read a "virtual issue" of the journal that offers a primer and further reading, here: <https://antipodeonline.org/2019/07/19/2017-2/> (last accessed 17 April 2020).