

Feeling things: Objects and emotions through history

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13. Moving Objects: Emotional Transformation, Tangibility, and Time-Travel

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Moving On: an Afterword on Future Research Directions

We all possess or remember objects that move us: portable emotional paraphernalia through which we define aspects of ourselves. From childhood onward we interact with real and imagined artefacts and in adulthood we curate our actual and virtual objects according to emotional categories.¹ Here is my current personal and professional ‘material autobiography’ created for this chapter. Firstly, family objects. Those which define my relationship with my deceased parents include: a St George and the Dragon brooch, a dolls’ house, a blue clutch bag, a nebulizer, and their wedding rings; some of them exist only in my memory. I have marked my son’s growing up by collecting objects that represent his changes: baby shoes, a tiny plastic builder christened Mr Dingle, increasingly detailed Games Workshop models, and numerous footballs. My husband is evoked through things as diverse as our matching wedding rings, a hotel room key-card, his glasses, a polo-shirt, a road-bike, and my Dr Martens. To trace my professional life in objects, here is one book that helped make me a historian: Ruth M. Arthur’s *The Saracen Lamp*, which I read as a child.² At its heart is the beautiful golden, jewelled lamp that Yusuf, a captured Saracen, constructed in the early fourteenth century to symbolise his forbidden love for his master’s daughter as she was about to leave France to marry an English knight. This lamp magically embodied the Saracen’s desire to protect her and remain a presence in her life, so emotionally powerful that it shaped three women’s stories spanning six centuries and determined the well-being of the family manor through the ages. In this book I see my love of gender and family history, and belief in the power of material culture.

¹ People build personal and familial stories through objects and images, in albums and on social media platforms. For academic perspectives on these practices see the AHRC funded ‘The Family Archive Project’, University of Cardiff: <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/familyarchive/> Accessed 07/10/2016.

² Ruth M. Arthur, *The Saracen Lamp*, drawings by Margery Gill (London, 1978).

You might justifiably argue that such personal detritus has nothing to do with histories of material culture and emotions, and even less relevance for the big questions of history itself. Yet, material culture historians are increasingly finding that both individuals and societies are the sum of their parts and their objects.³ Their scholarship shows the diverse ways to practice material culture history, the innumerable objects and spaces that can be investigated, and recognises that both act as agents. Equally, historians of emotions have done much to lay the theoretical frameworks of their field, and begun putting such theories into practice, although they have yet to grapple with the questions raised by the study of objects for (and of) feelings in the past.⁴ *Feeling Things* works at the interface of both scholarly endeavours. It not only demonstrates that the most powerful things are those which have some emotional resonance and reveals that objects make emotions manifest, visible, or substantive, it takes the lead in a new and exciting field of history, which has enormous potential to explore imaginatively and better understand societies and cultures.

Indeed, as this collection forcefully demonstrates, emotional autobiographies can be written to great effect not just about individuals, but also about families, communities, and nations, to offer new insights into societies across time and place. Perhaps what strikes me most about my egotistical game of ‘I have an object, therefore I am who I am’ is its cultural and historical specificity; it reveals a life in a precise time and place. Although yours and my emotional objects might differ, they will be composed of shared items and forms, for they are shaped in very similar ways which reveal societal and cultural rules. And this is what *Feeling*

³ Examples include Renata Ago, *Gusto for Things: A History of Objects in Seventeenth-Century Rome* (Chicago and London, 2013); Paula Findlen (ed.), *Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500-1800* (Oxon, 2013); Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (eds) *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings* (Farnham, 2010); Hannah Grieg, Jane Hamlett, and Leonie Hannan (eds) *Gender and Material Culture in Britain since 1600* (London, 2016); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner and Sarah Anne Carter, *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects* (Oxford, 2015).

⁴ For a somewhat randomly selected example of theoretical approaches, see: Susan J. Matt, ‘Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out’, *Emotion Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011), 117-24; Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, trans. Keith Tribe (Oxford, 2015); Plamper, ‘The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara H. Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2010), 237-65; Matt and Peter N. Stearns (eds) *Doing Emotions History* (Urbana, 2014), and for practical examples: Susan Broomhall (ed.) *Emotions in the Household, 1200-1900* (Basingstoke, 2014); Thomas Dixon, ‘The Tears of Mr Justice Willes’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2011), 1-23; Martin Francis, ‘Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951-1963’, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2002), 354-87.

Things so powerfully lays bare, since it covers European material culture from the medieval to early modern eras. And while the focus is on pre-industrial objects, it attends to their after-life; thereby exposing in enormous detail how different spatial and temporal contexts produced varied emotional responses and practices.

This is not to suggest any universality in emotional objects whose origins and formation are multiple. Some objects, like medieval relics, or wedding rings, are constructed to act predominantly as emotional artefacts. Others have become feeling things not through deliberate intent, but simply because a human associates them with events and circumstances that produce particular emotions, from the threatening and malign to the benign and transcendent. Emotional objects are also created in the flow of human relationships, and thus change over personal and historical time, since relationships shift too. Objects imbued with one meaning are later realigned like dynamic tessellations according to life-stage (child to adult) or relationship (patronage, financial, professional, and marital, and their ending: bankruptcy, divorce, bereavement), or at societal level through cultural shifts, constraints, and possibilities relating to religion, war, colonial and imperial expansion and subjugation, to name but a few. As the contributors to *Feeling Things* infer, the trigger to these changes at both individual and societal level involves memories and hindsight.

I aim, therefore, to develop these commonalities in the light of some of the questions that this collection raises and thereby pose some possibilities for future directions in the field. I will play on the three themes that structure the chapters: potent things, binding things, and moving things, exploring them in broader ways to suggest how they might shape the way historians tackle emotional artefacts. Thus my afterword takes movement as its overall category, since all the contributions evoke this: imaginative and supernatural movement, physical and temporal movement, and psychological and physiological movement. Furthermore, this organisational theme is informed by the various ways in which emotions infer motion. Emotions' meanings are mutable, both through time and in experience; and flow is invoked in scholarly conceptualisations of emotions, such as Sara Ahmed's definition that they are 'practices formed

in the relationships *between* bodies, objects, or subjects.’⁵ Finally, in the era this collection covers, of course, emotions were physical rather than psychological as Thomas Dixon explains: ‘movements, agitations, or convulsions with no special technical or theoretical import’.⁶

I also urge that scholars follow *Feeling Things*’ lead in its inclusive definition of objects. Be open to the many ways of defining what we include in the category of material culture, and be ready to practice a variety of approaches to the history of emotions and emotional-object scholarship.⁷ Thus while I acknowledge that the philosophically-minded distinguish between objects and thingness, I propose in this chapter that historians use a broad definition of materiality in order to explore the function of emotional objects and their changing meanings over time.⁸ We can consider the emotional meanings of things, not only of objects but of their locations, so that buildings and spaces are included in the analysis.⁹ We should encompass three-dimensional physical objects that survive, but also descriptions of non-surviving things, as well as imagined objects in print culture. Moreover, rather than investigate sole objects or simple types of objects we must adopt the model of *Feeling Things* and open up the relationships between objects in constructing emotional landscapes. How do a range of objects interact to construct and deconstruct feelings and identities?

It strikes me too that there is critical value in including all types of objects in discussions about emotions in the past. This collection focuses upon hand-made objects, those likely to have ‘charisma’ which may attract humans to imbue with them particular forms of emotional resonance.¹⁰ In a pre-industrial world this included mundane objects, which were translated into things that had meaning at individual or societal level, as Hilary Davidson’s wonderful evocation

⁵ Cited in Broomhall, ‘Introduction’, *idem* (ed.), *Spaces for Feeling: Emotions and Sociabilities in Britain 1650-1850* (Oxon, 2015), p. 2.

⁶ Dixon, ‘Weeping in Space: Tears, feelings, and enthusiasm in eighteenth-century Britain’, in Broomhall (ed.), *Spaces for Feeling*, p. 138.

⁷ [Cross ref Introduction](#)

⁸ For a useful overview of ideas around ‘objects’ and ‘things’ see Antony Hudek, ‘Introduction//Detours of Objects’, in *idem* (ed.), *The Object: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London and Cambridge, Mass., 2014), pp. 14-17. Ulrich *et al* use ‘thing’ and ‘object’ interchangeably because they do not follow the premise that ‘thing’ evokes resonances which ‘object’ does not. *Tangible Things*, p. 2.

⁹ For a concerted effort to assess both see Joanne Begiato, ‘Beyond The Rule of Thumb: The Materiality of Marital Violence in England c. 1660-1880’, forthcoming.

of the pluri-vocal nature of shoes' emotional meaning reveals.¹¹ Similarly, Sally Holloway shows that eighteenth-century mothers used readily available items such as fabric cockades and hearts and flowers printed on textiles to mark out their deep feelings for their infants, as well as exquisite and expensive hand-crafted pincushions and quilts.¹² As the volume's contributors reveal, people invest a high level of time, skill and, therefore, sentiment in objects they make by hand, whether necessities or luxuries. Thus there are a number of questions to be answered by historians of the industrial and post-industrial periods. Should we wonder, as Victor Margolin does, whether humans can develop emotional attachments to high-tech industrial objects compared to hand-crafted or manufactured ones?¹³ This probably underestimates the ability of people to create relationships with objects of all kinds. Anna Schram Vejlbj also asks whether the advent of mass production invested the 'homemade' with more emotional meaning.¹⁴ Certainly, if the unique end product of hand-crafting carries more emotional freight, then historians of emotions of the eras of machine-made and mass-produced goods need to be mindful of the different ways in which emotions and objects interacted; not to mention, as this volume suggests, with the ways that emotions as objects interact *through* or across time, as well as in particular times and places.

I suggest that careful consideration of machine-made, even mass-consumption, objects should nonetheless be included in future research, even or perhaps especially in relation to 'artisanal' products, in which the modern era has witnessed pockets of fascination, often pitched directly against industrial advancement.¹⁵ These are, after all, the objects that most people in modern and post-modern worlds encounter. They can be associated with feelings. Mass-produced dolls, for instance, promote a wave of nostalgic emotions in adults, as do the 'retro' objects consumed by generations nostalgically looking back to their parental homes and childhoods. Machine-made fabrics have been shown to convey emotions. Alison Matthews

¹⁰ Of immense interest will be the publications deriving from the research project 'Domestic Devotions: the Place of Piety in the Italian Renaissance Home 1400-1600 (Dr Abigail Brundin, Professor Deborah Howard, Dr Mary Laven), <http://domesticdevotions.lib.cam.ac.uk/> (Accessed 07/10/16).

¹¹ Cross ref Davidson

¹² Cross ref Holloway

¹³ Victor Margolin, 'Introduction: How Do I Love Thee? Objects of Endearment in Contemporary Culture' in Anna Moran and Sorcha O'Brien (eds), *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* (London, 2014), p. 4.

¹⁴ Anna Schram Vejlbj, 'Diligence and Emotion: Knitting in Danish Golden Age Portraiture', *Textile*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2016), 188-207, at 202.

¹⁵ See Hudek, 'Introduction//Detours of Objects', p. 14.

David, for instance, charts the fear and revulsion that became associated with flammable flannelette in the late nineteenth century, and which drove efforts to find substitutes for children's nightwear that were not so prone to catch fire.¹⁶ Moreover, there is a potential for uniqueness in objects that are partly machine-made but also hand-assembled. Mass-made models, such as dolls houses, model planes, and fantasy figures, for instance, can be transformed into objects unique to their modellers during the personal process of assembling and painting them. Thus, they may also have distinctive emotional weight that serves specific functions for different age groups, genders, and communities. All such objects have prompted many feelings which offer a range of insights into class, gender, race, migration, and much more.¹⁷

A broad definition of materiality equips us to explore the textural complexity of emotional material culture. After all, this volume demonstrates that it is difficult to fully separate embodiment from material culture. Contributors, for instance, discuss dead saints' body parts (Mary Magdalen's tooth) and excreta (Christ's tears), people's bodily handling of objects through rubbing, kissing and touching (letters, books, relics, stones), disembodied and prosthetic bodily parts (iron hands), and bodies' responses to objects and things. My afterword extends this to make a case for including in the categories of objects that evoke emotions those which are more ephemeral or transitory, such as music, food, and smell.¹⁸

Transformation

Feeling Things shows the immense capacity of emotional objects to be transformed in numerous ways. The first section, 'potent' things, focuses upon objects that embodied supernatural powers. As the chapters show, medieval saints' relics' holiness and charisma could be transferred by a haptic act to a receiving object. Tokens in the form of replica chemises, for example, were transformed when touched to the casket containing the Virgin Mary's chemise. Now sharing the

¹⁶ Alison Matthews David, 'Blazing Ballet Girls and Flannelette Shrouds: Fabric, Fire, and Fear in the Long Nineteenth Century', *Textile*, 14:2 (2016), 244-67 at 257-64.

¹⁷ Pierre Lemonnier, *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-Verbal Communication* (Walnut Creek, CA 2012). For a personalised example see Matt Houlbrook, 'Hidden Objects and Untold Histories' <https://mbsbham.wordpress.com/2016/05/12/hidden-objects/>.

¹⁸ For the historical value of examining a preserved tortilla and 'sprit-writing' preserved on a slate, see Ulrich *et al*, *Tangible Things*, pp. 103, 165-6. For directions in the history of the senses see William Tullett, 'Grease and Sweat: Race and Smell in Eighteenth-Century English Culture', *Cultural and Social History* (2016), 1-16.

relic's miraculous properties, the tokens became at one and the same time consumer and devotional objects, which in turn each potentially possessed further layers of emotional value.¹⁹ Scholars could fruitfully explore these kinds of movements in meaning more explicitly. Such divine and/or emotional presence can of course be gained, lost, or diminished over time or across space according to different cultural contexts. The Stone of Scone, as Alicia Marchant shows, was at one point believed to transform a person into a monarch, while by the twentieth century it was instead a mythical marker of nationhood.²⁰ Shoes' 'vessel-like qualities', in different times and places, Hilary Davidson reveals, could hold the divine or the magical, and contain the protective spirit of original wearers, or capture malign forces.

As such, another critical research question scholars need to ask is why, when and where some objects stop being emotional artefacts. Clearly a key feature of such shifts relates to societies' changing notions of religion and the supernatural. So emotional accretions wear off when people do not share the same faith; indeed fear and disgust might thus replace awe and desire. Interestingly, however, location and history appear to be significant in evoking emotions, regardless of whether spiritual beliefs are shared. So the concealed shoes, originally hidden to ward off evil and protect a house, for instance, are retained *in-situ* by their modern homeowners following discovery.²¹ Perhaps their new owners still see them as emotionally evocative – bearers of magical power and therefore provoking awe; perhaps they are repelled by them, but fearful to remove them: different emotions, but the same result. Christian myths can also be harnessed in similar ways to holy relics, but to other ends in secular societies. A telling example is the National Socialist Blood-flag (*Blutfahne*) ceremony in which the flag carried at the Munich Beer-hall Putsch of 1923, and stained with the blood of the 'sixteen martyrs', was used from 1935 as a holy symbol. In flag-dedication ceremonies, banners and flags were touched to the blood-flag to be sanctified. In entirely different ideological conditions to medieval holy contagion, the political ritual of the blood-flag, while rooted in Christian myth, was deployed to confirm the structure of the Nazi mythos and construct community experience. For all this might have shared similarities with charismatic objects and the feelings they stirred, no doubt the

¹⁹ Cross ref Randles

²⁰ Cross ref Marchant

²¹ Cross ref Davidson

emotions stirred by these acts of transference led to distinctive outcomes in 1930s Germany.²²

Transformation can also occur at a more routine, less supernatural level. Are there objects that can cause antipathy because of what they represent in the light of personal or cultural change? Does involuntary consumption and the second-hand, recycled and charitable nature of objects change subject-object interaction and meaning? An example might be the clothing that slaves, paupers, or servants were obliged to wear, or objects associated with institutions like hospitals, prisons, schools and workhouses.²³ What would be interesting to uncover is how far personal and society's views are shaped and possibly changed by visceral responses to such objects.

Tangibility

The artefacts explored in *Feeling Things* have different physical qualities. They include saints' bodily relics, durable stone and fragile fabrics which still survive. But the contributions also show that an emotional artefact does not need solid substance. Other objects, for example, are far more intangible, like inky 'debris' on a letter. Some are literally absent, like Christ's evaporated tear housed within another object. Helen Hickey points out that the Holy Tear's reliquary was a vessel for what once was, but was no more: 'A tear is an object that we cannot capture, only remember.'²⁴ Others might be temporarily absent, perhaps hidden for long periods, such as concealed objects which only come into view occasionally. For much of their existence the person who hides them is aware of them at the level of knowledge rather than handling or seeing them. Some emotional artefacts cannot be handled. In Carolyn Steedman's chapter, a line of text is imagined as a voice from the past that evokes and kindles feelings.²⁵ Thus, surely scholars must include sounds as emotional objects, even if that sound is most often recoverable only when rendered as notes on a page, or an instruction to play words to the tune of another ballad, perhaps

²² Simon Taylor, 'Symbol and ritual under National Socialism', *British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 32, No. 4 (1981), 508-10.

²³ For involuntary consumption, see John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 2007). For the material culture of the poor and institutionalised see Jane Hamlett, *At Home in the Institution: Material Life in Asylums, Lodging Houses and Schools in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Basingstoke, 2014).

²⁴ Cross ref Hickey

²⁵ Cross ref Steedman

itself now lost. After all, music is the most universal prompt of various emotions.²⁶

Equally, if a disappeared trace of a thing can evoke emotions and continue to do so over time despite its form only existing in report, we can include objects that are not just delicate or easily broken but those for which we only have descriptions or those which are replaced by other versions. These include multiple iterations of an object that is loaded with emotional power but does not remain constant since it is regularly replaced by the subject, such as food or perfume. There is evidence that suggests that both of these are associated with strong emotions and therefore repeatedly sought out when one form is consumed.²⁷ Thus memories of childhood sweets and toys are emotional objects, which tell us something about the adult's emotional perception of childhood. Not simply a Proustian moment of involuntary memory, this can reveal wider cultural trends.²⁸ Elizabeth Fry, for example, reminisced in 1828 about her mother's wild flowers and shells she and her mother collected when she was a child. She recalled the support such objects gave her in later life: 'I may truly say, in the midst even of deep trouble, and often most weighty engagements of a religious and philanthropic nature, I have derived advantage, refreshment, and pleasure, from my taste for these things, making collections of them, and various natural curiosities.'²⁹ This captured both her emotional memories of her mother, but crucially demonstrates that in her adulthood the idea of a successful eighteenth-century childhood was as a time of learning through play following the developments in concepts of child-rearing.³⁰ In short, we can be more experimental about what constitutes an emotional object, incorporating a sensory approach which expands our study to include how people define objects' sensual traces such as taste, smell, sound, sight, as well as touch in relation to feeling.

²⁶ There is established scholarship on music, psychology and emotions, but as far as I'm aware there is little in the way of historical investigation of music as a tangible object/sense and the relationship between it and past societies. For research on the changing emotions in Europe's musical life, see Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, 'The Musical Score of Emotions': https://www.mpg.de/9788927/F003_focus_032-039.pdf (accessed 07/10/2016)

²⁷ This area is being opened up, for example see the suggestions for future research directions made by Barbara Keys, 'Senses and Emotions in the History of Sport', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2013), 21-38.

²⁸ For discussion of the role of memory and affection in accessing the past, see Emily Robinson 'Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible', *Rethinking History*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2010), 503-20, at 514.

²⁹ *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry with Extracts from her Journal and Letters. Edited by Two of Her Daughters*, in Two volumes, volume 1, Philadelphia, 1847, p. 23.

³⁰ *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry*, pp. 20-23.

Entirely imagined objects are also powerful. In print culture, from fiction to life-writings, the association of objects with emotions served a variety of purposes. A didactic function is most obvious. Examples are the imagined doll and dolls' house in *The Adventures of a Doll*, published in 1816. In this the eponymous doll embarked on a series of adventures with different children into whose possession she fell. The doll acted as the agent teaching girls what was appropriate behaviour. In one chapter, she narrated the flaws of one child who temporarily owned her. Amelia Fry's flaws stemmed from her mother who was the archetypal 'bad' mother of the period: overly indulgent and incapable of acting as a moral exemplar. Both parental failings were demonstrated during a walk mother and daughter took on the beach. Bored and quarrelsome, they came across 'a company of merry little girls' playing with a 'playhouse' which the girls had created from a hollow in the rock. The girls were managing their domestic domain, arranging blue mussel shell and white cockle ornaments along with bits of broken china on the rock 'shelves.' The doll reported that Mrs Fry was temporarily moved by the girls' healthy, happy faces and 'could not but feel, that they had more joy with their simple shells and broken china, than she had ever had in her magnificent baby-house.' However, this charming encounter did not rescue the insensible Frys. Furious with the girls' simple pleasures, Amelia poured all their ornaments into her lap and ran to the sea and threw them in.³¹ The book was intended to educate girls on appropriate moral behaviour, typically judged through their actions and capacity for emotional self-management. What scholars need to explore is how far evoking feelings around certain behaviours might increase success in conformity, helping to translate didacticism into ideas and practice. Of course, understanding emotional artefacts adds layers of nuance to our understanding of people's behaviour. So here, although Amelia's behaviour was intended for censure, girls reading about her actions might have inferred that dolls' houses did not always have to be about conformity and relished her rebellion enacted through the substitute dolls' house.

Tangibility takes other forms. Books, as Lara Farina's chapter shows, are one of the objects where it is possible to see the result of readers' touch. She argues that an author might intend the 'literal holding of the book' to work in conjunction with the text to trigger feelings which thereby assist in forming a devotional collective as the book is circulated among several

³¹ *The Adventures of a Doll: Compiled with the Hope of Affording Amusement and Instruction. By Mary Mister*

readers.³² The connecting premise of section two, ‘binding’ things, is that tactile engagement creates and sustains inter-personal emotions and networks. Correspondence is the most obvious example, and Diana Barnes traces the emotional residue of marks on pages that were written upon, folded, sealed, smelled, caressed, and sometimes perhaps torn-up by their senders and recipients to historicise elite personal emotions and cultural writing models.³³ Another type of object that is worth investigating in this vein is political and military memorabilia. Did owning and – crucially – handling mementoes, jewellery, engravings, and figurines, help to develop emotional relationships that created, reinforced, and sustained political and national beliefs?³⁴ Haptic interaction with objects is not necessarily easily accessed, and evidence of handling, wear and tear, rubbing, and polishing often only exist in descriptive or narrativised form. In these cases, accounts do not always describe the effects of touch and it may be here where historians of emotional artefacts need to deploy social history techniques to build a contextual picture of practice. So, for example, it would be fruitful to examine which items of furniture in nineteenth-century homes might function as emotional objects by contextualising surviving examples in accounts of and guides to domestic cleaning for wives, housekeepers, and domestic servants, alongside women’s descriptions of their daily housekeeping.³⁵

Time-Travel

As Ulrich *et al* observe, ‘[f]or the most part ... things are radically unstable. They change physically over time, in their uses by successive human groups, and in their significance to various peoples.’³⁶ Thus, the case-studies in *Tangible Things* operate as a journey, travelling with the object from its origin to its current location in the collections of Harvard University; a journey often signifying colonial oppression. Other kinds of journeys through time are traceable in objects. Emotional objects can tie different generations together through time. There is

(London, 1816).

³² Cross ref Farina

³³ Cross ref Barnes

³⁴ For example, Belinda Beaton, ‘Materializing the Duke’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2005), 100-107; Simon Morgan, ‘Material Culture and the Politics of Personality in Early Victorian England’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2012), 127-146.

³⁵ Alice Dolan and Sally Holloway make a similar point, suggesting that a challenge historians of emotional objects face is to quantify groups or collections of emotional objects. Dolan and Holloway, ‘Emotional Textiles: An Introduction’, *Textile*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2016), 152-159 at 156.

³⁶ Ulrich *et al*, *Tangible Things*, p. 5.

evidence, for example, that dolls' houses act as mnemonics of family and generational affection and function to connect family members across time. The travels of the most expensive and beautiful examples are more easily charted since they were often converted into family heirlooms. The documentation for surviving Dutch cabinet houses reveals that their female owners frequently stipulated that they were to be passed down the feminine line to daughters, cousins, or nieces, forming a 'matrilineal inheritance.'³⁷ The Tate Baby House, which was constructed around 1760 was also passed down from mother to daughter until its last owner died in 1929.³⁸

Considering the emotions generated around objects opens up the possibilities beyond conventional chronologies. The final section of this book, 'moving' things, meditates on the ways that historical objects can distort or collapse time when different emotional communities and cultures encountered them. True enough; but it is possible to take this further in our scholarly examination of emotional artefacts and consider their role as time-travellers.³⁹ Emotional objects have an after-life, which can be traced in the way that their meanings and the feelings they evoke change over time. Yet they also function to prompt subjects to use them to look back, perhaps with nostalgia, or as a lesson, or warning, and yet others to look forwards, imbuing them with feelings projected to future generations. Sally Holloway shows that a range of objects associated with infants fulfilled this role. The tokens that mothers left with their infants at the Foundling Hospital, and the pincushion gifts spelling out blessings of good health to elite babies, were all repositories of hopes for the future; they transmitted well-being into children's future lives.⁴⁰

As such, emotional artefacts are even more diachronic in nature than material culture more broadly, since their historicising with regard to emotions facilitates the charting of their interaction with cultural trends even more sharply than an object-biography approach might

³⁷ Broomhall and Jennifer Spinks, 'Imagining Domesticity in Early Modern Dutch Houses' in *idem, Early Modern Women in the Low Countries: Feminizing Sources and Interpretations of the Past* (Oxon, 2011), p. 112.

³⁸ Halina Pasierbska, *Dolls' Houses from the V&A Museum of Childhood* (London, 2015), p. 344.

³⁹ [Cross ref Marchant](#)

⁴⁰ [Cross ref Holloway](#). Similarly, the majority of surviving Danish christening garments constructed between 1700 and 1850 incorporate red and metal elements, which were used to protect newborns from future dangers including being bewitched, replaced by a changeling, illness and death. See Tove Engelhardt Mathiasen, 'Protective Strategies and Emotions Invested in Early Modern Danish Christening Garments', *Textile*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2016), 208-25.

allow. As Susan Broomhall demonstrates, this can be especially useful to examine national identity. She selects a number of objects to show how materiality, location, and assemblage change their meaning in terms of colonial presence and dominion over time. For instance, the objects resulting from a shipwreck in 1656 caused fear for the crew of the Dutch East India Company vessel that came upon the wreck artefacts two years later, both for their individual fates and the fate of Dutch claimants to the region. By the twentieth century, however, the same objects caused excitement and greed over their historical value.⁴¹ As the contributors to *Tangible Things* observe, emotional power may be discharged or changed once an objects' location or context is altered.⁴²

Thus I propose that instead of a one-way journey from origin to collection, it might be possible to construct a diachronic framework of an object that attends to the *development* of emotional artefacts. Historians could attempt this in order to explore different ways of thinking about historical time, from both individual and societal levels, comparing objects and emotions across time to show how socio-cultural practices and ideas influenced subject-object interaction and meaning. This necessitates more engagement with the fields of memory and its cousins, nostalgia and hindsight, since the most powerful memories are those associated with acute emotions and emotional events.⁴³ The Magdalene reliquary that Elina Gertsman discusses, for instance, acted upon its viewers by making its subject, function, and materials into emotional conduits. Each component triggered memory of cultural significance and knowledge, which in turn evoked a feeling.⁴⁴ Davidson's exploration of shoes also shows that the selection of objects considered as repositories of emotions was often shaped by memory.⁴⁵ A special issue on textiles as emotional objects also recently revealed that textiles are often 'presented as important vehicles for emotionally charged memories ... personalized and carefully preserved before being passed along by family members'.⁴⁶

⁴¹ [Cross ref Broomhall](#)

⁴² Ulrich *et al*, *Tangible Things*, p. 171.

⁴³ For examples of the links between emotions and memories, sometimes tied to a recollection of material objects, see Joanne Begiato, *Parenting in England 1760-1830: Emotions, Identity and Generation* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 99-100, Chapter 5; and Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London, 1995).

⁴⁴ [Cross ref Gertsman](#)

⁴⁵ [Cross ref Davidson](#)

⁴⁶ Dolan and Holloway, 'Emotional Textiles', 157.

To offer an example, I want to reflect on the way that accounts of personal experiences of dolls' houses are more often than not recounted through memories. In contextualising my own research on dolls' houses as emotional objects I collected around 200 tweets by people reflecting on their relationships with their childhood dolls' houses.⁴⁷ They reveal that modern dolls' houses are still handed across generations, not for any intrinsic monetary value but because their emotional worth makes them precious. Dolls' houses house people's feelings for loved family members. Everyone who volunteered information about a dolls' house mentioned one or more relatives. Often people remembered with enormous fondness the male family members who made their dolls' houses. As adults, people remember their loved relatives through the medium of objects, so that as an emotional artefact the dolls' house comes to physically represent and sustain family relationships. As I have shown elsewhere, autobiographers often associate specific object with relatives. Mary Schimmler recorded in her memoir that her grandfather would blow a little silver whistle on their walks beside a lake in the 1780s, calling to him water fowl to feed. Sixty-six years later she still wore it 'in remembrance of him'.⁴⁸ There is considerable room for imaginative analysis in this vein to shed more light on notions of parenting, family and gender. Why not compare oral history or personal recollections of the making, use, and memory of the objects to access information about past feeling?

Another way in which to imaginatively interrogate the relationship between emotions, memories and material culture is through nostalgia, which acts as a medium for fighting the passage of time and loss of loved ones. Recent work on the role of dolls' houses in elderly women's lives, for example, reveals how nostalgia shapes their use. Hyun-Jung Oh explains that the older women who collect and furnish these houses participate in a 'cult of nostalgia,' objectifying 'their memory or imagination of childhood or ancestry, such that Tudor, Victorian, or 1940s styles are favoured.' The medium of dolls' houses allows them to return to childhood and the 'warmth of the home,'⁴⁹ and thus gives them a sense of control over objects 'that are

⁴⁷ <https://jbhist.wordpress.com/2015/11/17/the-dolls-house-and-its-links-with-home-and/>

⁴⁸ Cited in Begiato, *Parenting in England*, p. 126.

⁴⁹ Hyun-Jung Oh, 'Putting Together Memories and Fantasies: The Phenomenon of Dolls' Houses and Women in their Second Childhood', <http://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/small-stories-thinking-small/putting-together-memories-fantasies-phenomenon-dolls-houses-women-second-childhood/> Accessed 08/10/16.

manipulable and protected from inexorable human destiny.’⁵⁰ Chen points out that playing with a dolls’ house:

preserves and condenses a particular moment when all objects inside it are exhibited in an intact condition with no traces of having been tarnished. And the dolls’ house inhabitants, if any, are carefully posed to play their parts in the pageant. Indeed, the dolls’ house world freezes action at a particular time and position.⁵¹

A similar contraction and preservation of time is at work in dolls’ houses dating from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They too were associated with nostalgia through their function as an emotional object that stimulated nostalgic feelings for a lost family life, but also helped manage and soothe those emotions.

Thinking about the formation and development of emotional objects in this manner enables us to see how emotional objects disrupt conventional chronologies through hindsight which operates backwards to reshape people’s perceptions of the past and its material culture. Hindsight is shaped by emotional valences, such as grief, sadness, anger, horror, but also by societal consensus about the way in which an event should be perceived once ‘wisdom’ or additional knowledge is attained. After all, memory, material culture and emotions form an important nexus. Memories ‘are often literally housed, with dwellings and the objects they contain providing the key to remembrance.’⁵² This links in turn to personal identity. Marius Kwint, for example, observes that the domestic interior is a space that ‘serves as a model of the psyche, a concrete personality, and is the environment which memory tends most powerfully to reconstruct’.⁵³ Gaston Bachelard also linked memories of the home with the ‘self’, observing for example: ‘the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us’.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Nancy Wei-Ning Chen, ‘The Art of Housekeeping: Dolls’ Houses and the Victorian Domestic Interior’, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/moc/small-stories-thinking-small/art-housekeeping-dolls-houses-victorian-domestic-interior/> Accessed 08/10/16. For more on this see Nancy Wei-Ning Chen, ‘Playing with Size and Reality: The Fascination of a Dolls’ House World,’ *Children’s Literature in Education*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2015), 278-95.

⁵¹ Wei-Ning Chen, ‘Playing with Size and Reality’, 284.

⁵² Leora Auslander, ‘Beyond Words,’ *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 4 (2005), 1015-45, at 1020.

⁵³ Marius Kwint, ‘Introduction’, in *idem*, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (eds), *Material Memories: Design and Evocation* (New York, 1999), 11.

⁵⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (New York [1964], edition 2014), p. 36 and see Chapter 1.

In fact, as both a space and a repository of domestic objects, the home is often invoked in memoirs in its imaginary form, and is a particularly significant emotional object for many. Almira Gray's biography of the Gray family, published in 1927, is an excellent illustration of the home's potential emotional potency. It was the family house itself rather than her husband's family that inspired Almira to write. She titled her first chapter: 'The voice of the house' and in it she demonstrated that it was the very fabric of Grays' Court as a house through which she formulated her feelings and identity. She says:

It is not given to many to live as I have done in a beautiful, historic, and romantically situated house, and from so early an age, before my twentieth birthday, that I seem to have become a very part of the house. To me the long Gallery lined with oak speaks with no uncertain voice of the past, of the many different people who have worked, played, and suffered there since the middle of the seventeenth century, when it was built on top of the ancient thirteenth-century walls and pillars of the old official house of the Treasurer of York Minster, situated to the north-east of that great Cathedral. It is not that there are ghosts in the House – ghosts imply something terrifying, something unhappy; but there is, at any rate to me, some atmosphere, some impelling force which cannot be particularly described, but which nevertheless suggests something very near, very akin to personal life. ... The House inspires love, admiration, respect.⁵⁵

As Almira's feelings about her family home show, the time-travelling object is propelled beyond the subject's own life-span through emotions like hope and fear, but also, through the strong affective ties the dwelling itself is personified, almost, as an elder; an inhabitant from the past still standing in the present. The family's notable, worthy ancestors are conceptualised as having imbued the very fabric of the house with their admirable personalities and qualities so that the dwelling becomes an agent of family and individual identity and reputation.

Conclusion

⁵⁵ Almira Gray, *Papers and diaries of a York family 1764-1839* (London, 1927).

Feeling Things pushes us to think more carefully about the relationship between objects and emotions and do more than merely record the feelings attached to things. Emotions are made manifest by being located in an object. Material culture thus enables historians of emotions to provide clearer evidence about the ways in which emotions operate at a variety of levels and beyond human physiology, bridging some of the gap between mediated and felt emotions. Attention to emotional objects also helps historians to engage with the agentic nature of things. Scholars need to find new ways to explore this process, which is so challenging due to the interplay between the universal and the individual in the emotional meaning of such objects. It is nonetheless critical to do so, since it can help to explain the dissemination and reception of cultural values. So, for example, my own research uncovers examples of men recounting similar reactions to military objects, which prompts me to argue that emotional objects functioned as disseminators of values that people shared and interpreted within their pre-existing mutual knowledge of gender constructions. Nonetheless, engagement with them was clearly shaped by people's individual experiences such as personal emotional context, and also by factors such as gender, age, and class which determined access to specific material cultural forms.

Another complex feature of emotional objects that scholars need to confront is their explicitly dual aspect in performing both as agents in stimulating people's emotions, but also as repositories, empty until filled with human meaning that they then hold, retain, pour out, and release over time and subject-object interaction. This tension between vessel and agent is laid especially bare at the diachronic level in the form of movement, between objects, people, societies, and across time, place, and cultures. As explored above, the diverse objects discussed in *Feeling Things* share mutability and multi-vocality, and, often, engagement with the senses. They have another feature in common: in their capacity to act as time travellers. Thus scholars can do more than trace the journey an object has taken, wherein it is juxtaposed alongside assumptions or pre-existing attitudes to re-vision history or traditional narratives to scrutinise racial, gender, and social hierarchies. While this is enormously valuable, tracing the emotional diachronicity of objects adds a further dimension because it enables them and their subjects over time to be analysed in terms of development rather than simply building a chronological narrative.

After all, as Antony Hudek observes: 'objects define us because they come first, by

commanding our attention, even our respect; they exist before us, possibly without us'.⁵⁶ As *Feeling Things* shows, objects also exist within us, and we exist in objects, and historians must unpick these relationships and their motive force to help us appreciate and analyse the material, mental, and emotional worlds of past societies.

⁵⁶ Hudek, 'Introduction', p. 15.