a sense of how women coped and worked while men opened up new hunting areas, new farm plots, and new fishing grounds or, more recently, while the men participated in labor migration. Finally, there is no analysis of women in ritual arenas or enough analysis of them as actors in their own right.

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Obsidian Reflections: Symbolic Dimensions of Obsidian in Mesoamerica by Marc N. Levine and David M. Carballo, eds.


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Obsidian is one of the few materials that has allowed—albeit its limited geographical availability—itself to be formatted to fit so many different tasks, to be handled by so various social actors, and to take clear part of such diverse spheres in social life simultaneously. In this many-sided quality lies part of the interest that has moved its study forward in the most varied regions of the globe. Obsidian Reflections is an outcome of that interest and a concrete contribution gathering a number of study cases focused on obsidian in Mesoamerica, in which we find varied and complementary approaches to one of its less explored sides: the symbolic.

How past societies have organized and made use of the materials surrounding them has depended on a wide network of practices and associations that have given each element its own position and social value. The search for some thread of insight on this complex social weave moves us to explore various analytical paths and to deal with classification schemes that differ from the ones in the modern Western world.

This book is devoted to such a task, trying and combining multiple paths of analysis, all of which are potentially fruitful, to examine the role of obsidian in the Mesoamerican view of the world. On the one hand, there is thorough use of the richness and diversity of the Mesoamerican record, whether its archaeological, ethnological, or ethnographic aspects, and even some of these aspects combined. In the same way, various study regions are considered, including Central and West Mexico, the Oaxaca highlands, and even Honduras, Guatemala, and Belize, without losing sight of the larger region and the processes developed within it, providing a solid basis for analysis. The chapters in the book cover the ancient past through recent and current times, allowing us the possibility of making some links between ways of understandings and using obsidian along this wide time span.

Finally, the approach to the different cases is carried out from thorough contextual analyses, which consider obsidian in its relation to other types of materials and in varied social spaces such as ceremonial centers, households, mines, caves, and funerary contexts, therefore providing potential access to the signification of obsidian in social life.

In particular, the introductory chapter shows a detailed review carried out by Marc Levine of the theoretical perspectives in the study of obsidian in Mesoamerica, which examines both the traditional approaches (normative, functional, political economy) and the more modern perspectives (which focus on concepts such as life history, being in the world, object agency, and value, among others).

The following three chapters—by Véronique Darras, by Alejandro Pastrana and Ivonne Athie, and by John Monaghan—represent the ethnological and ethnographic approaches to the subject. What is highlighted is the native understandings of the place of obsidian in the world, working toward chains of associations of different terms and concepts that shed light on the significance of obsidian in specific historical contexts.

The archaeological approaches, developed in the chapters by Kazuo Aoyama, by Marc Levine, by David Carballo, by W. James Stemp and Jaime Awe, and by Serra Puche and colleagues, take into account different material records, tackled via technologypological, microwear, spatial, provenance, and contextual analyses. There is a tendency to consider that the role of obsidian in ritual contexts is
primarily related to legitimization practices of a group within society (elites, dynasties, rising chiefs, etc.). However, in other cases, it is proposed that processes such as the conformation of social identities can influence the patterns of use of obsidian in the past.

Finally, William Parry carries out in his closing chapter a clear integration and examination of what is known about the ancient meanings of obsidian according to different fields of analysis: ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources, uses, and contexts of deposition. As he moves forward, the author goes back and discusses what he finds relevant in each chapter, adding his own research to ongoing debates on the participation of obsidian artifacts in funerary rituals in Teotihuacan.

Obsidian Reflections can be seen as an outstanding drive toward knowledge of symbolism and ancient ideologies related to obsidian in Mesoamerica, with approaches relevant beyond this region. What partially underlies the entire work is an approach to materiality inclined toward segmenting objects according to their performance in different domains of social action (domestic–ritual, symbolic–decorative–functional, and so forth), which can hinder the understanding of the object as a unit. Going back to the initial weave metaphor, the unit is made up at the knots, which are points of a network in which multiple layers of meaning converge and thicken. The challenge of trying ways to overcome segmentation in search of the whole must always continue.

Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier by Tania Murray Li.


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Tania Murray Li’s recent book, Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier, represents a mature intervention into the fate of rural Indonesians in the wake of twenty-some years of relentless global integration. I have no specific axe to grind with the ontologists that have come to dominate discussions of indigenous difference in recent anthropology—other than voicing that I don’t share their enthusiasm or like the philosophical impoverishment it usually implies. Li’s book is refreshingly not part of the trend. In fact, it is proof of what deep ethnography has always offered the anthropological enterprise and evidence of how fundamental political economy is to understanding the predicament in which Sulawesi highlanders now find themselves. After decades of engagement with the state, agribusiness developers, and coastal merchants—in their own active pursuit of a forever-receding horizon of “modernity”—most of their lives are simply far worse than they used to be.

As Li states in the Introduction,

The surprising finding of this book is that indigenous highlanders, people who are imagined by activists of the global indigenous and peasant movements to be securely attached to their land and communities, joined the ranks of people unable to sustain themselves... More surprisingly still, the process that dislodged them from their land wasn’t initiated by land-grabbing corporations or state agencies. There was no “primitive accumulation” of the kind Marx described... The process through which they lost control over their collectively owned land was far less dramatic, even mundane. [p. 3]

The book goes on to tell a literal and figurative tale of land loss over the last couple of decades—a slow but sure process of dispossession and the steady redefinition of these highlanders’ lives in terms of private property, profit, and new paradigms of material inequality.

The fact that this was as much or more the product of the highlanders’ own pursuits of the false promises of modernity as it was any explicit bullying by more powerful outside development actors, and that a few decades later they ended up lumped together with the rest of the world’s landless and poor, isn’t necessarily that surprising. I also think Li simplifies a bit by deciding to articulate the argument as contrary to the idealized imaginations of rural social movements and indigenous activists. Such actors do of course trade in strategic essentialisms and romantic resistance stories, all while the populations for which they speak get absorbed by global capital. However, judging from personal experience and from many scholarly treatments with a more nuanced view of social movements, many are also well versed in logics of self-criticism, critical reflection, and even outright cynicism at times. I’m not sure it really works to lump all activists together in the way that the book does at times. Contemporary activists can also represent interlocutors equally self-conscious about how they too are wrapped up in the problem, even willing to concede they are part of it, rather than the only ones fighting for a “real” solution.

Despite this one disagreement, I find Li’s book a fascinating account and necessary analytical take on two major counts. The first is methodological. Land’s End is a wonderful lesson in the benefits of long-term engagement in a particular locale with the same collaborators; it could and should be read as a significant ethnographic statement in that