



The Materialities of Be-longing

Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean*

Guest editors Piera Rossetto and Ewa Tartakowsky

*But to be certain of our own existence,
we need the objects, the gestures, and the words.*

Herta Müller

Throughout their long history, the humanities and social sciences have been influenced by several ‘turns’: the interpretative turn, the cultural turn, the affective turn, the spatial turn, the material turn, and the ‘mobilities turn’ (Hannam et al. 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006), the last being perhaps one of the most recent of this incomplete list.

Although ‘whether and how mobility constitutes a new paradigm in and for the social sciences’ (Faist 2013: 1638) has been up for discussion, it is unquestionable that scholars of different disciplines find themselves fully immersed in and confronted with what has been framed as ‘the mobilities moment’ (Brettell 2018: 18).

As a transdisciplinary field of research which has been steadily growing and expanding (Faulconbridge and Hui 2016), mobilities studies have given new input also to the discussion about the relationship between migrant worlds and material cultures, between mobility and materiality (Basu and Coleman 2008). Indeed, Arjun Appadurai (1986;1996) and George Markus (1995) have already called for their contemporaries ‘to follow not only the movement of people, but also of things; metaphors and ideas; plots and stories; lives and biographies’ (Brettell 2018: 19). However, as noted by anthropologist Galitzine-Loumpet, ‘the many sociological and anthropological studies of the migratory phenomenon take only partial interest in objects; also, studies on material culture rarely consider [...] objects within the mobility condition peculiar to migration’ (Galitzine-Loumpet 2013: 4, our translation).¹

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¹ “les nombreuses études sociologiques ou anthropologiques du phénomène migratoire ne s’intéressent qu’accessoirement aux objets ; pas plus que les études de la culture matérielle n’abordent [...] les objets dans le régime de mobilité spécifique de la migration” (Galitzine-Loumpet 2013: 4).



Since the beginning of the 2010s, a growing number of research projects and publications have sought ‘to understand the relationships of humans and things in the context of flight and migration’,² such as ‘objects of exile’ (Bischoff and Schlör 2013a), ‘precipitates of re-memory’ (Tolia-Kelly 2004), and a constellation of things that were left behind or taken with, that went lost or managed to survive. Objects in exile and objects of exile³ are interrogated and conceived as ‘relational objects’ that bear a ‘cumulative memory’ and belong to both realms of ‘materiality and immateriality’ (Galitzine-Loumpet 2013).

This thematic issue of *Mobile Culture Studies. The Journal >mcsj>* is dedicated to the ‘unexpected directions’ that research can take when things are taken seriously (Brown 2001; 2004; 2015). Like human beings, things also ‘embark on a journey and find themselves somewhere – elsewhere in the world – again’ (Bischoff and Schlör 2013b: 9, our translation). To follow the trajectories of displaced things and persons requires openness to the ‘surprise of movement’, to the ‘cultural connections between unexpected times and places’ (Greenblatt 2010: 18; 17).

Researching the entanglement of ‘materiality, agency, and subjecthood’ (Dini 2017: 3) in the context of exile and migration encompasses the effort to unveil an object’s ‘resonance’: its power ‘to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which – as a metaphor or, more simply as metonymy – it may be taken by a viewer to stand’ (Greenblatt 1990: 19–20). What place do objects occupy in the process of making sense of a specific event or an entire life trajectory? Do objects enable us ‘to find more imaginative ways of connecting micro and macro levels’ (Rügen 2010: 660), knowing that ‘a change of scale might lead to a change of question and of explanation’ (Struck, Ferris and Revel 2011: 579)? How is it that some objects are mobilised and others are instead – consciously or unconsciously – left aside? Do the latter tell us different stories than the former?

However, this same entanglement of materiality, agency, and subjecthood can also be considered from a less explored and yet equally fruitful perspective: a self-reflective stance – on the part of the researcher – towards the objects in/of exile. What happens when the researchers themselves are the ones who move or find themselves in a condition of *exilance* (Nuselovici 2013)? Through the mediation of literary texts or archival sources, of images or personal recollections, researchers are confronted with the experience that people have of mobility in its broader sense: of going elsewhere, coming from elsewhere, longing for elsewhere but also of feeling or being perceived as belonging to elsewhere. Why does the researcher stop at a particular object when listening, reading, and looking at these stories of migration and/or exile? Wonder – affirms Greenblatt – is the power of the object ‘to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention’ (Greenblatt 1990: 21): what unexpected directions might wonder impress on a research path?

Issue 7 of *Mobile Culture Studies. The Journal >mcsj>* originated from a call for submissions which aimed at grasping the transnational resonances that objects of/in exile enshrine. At the same time, we wanted the collection to be ‘peculiar, particular, and local’, sharing the view that cultural mobility is better understood in terms of *contingentia* than through the prisms of

2 <http://materialitaet-migration.de/en/> is part of the project <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/593397.html>; Bischoff and Schlör 2013b.

3 <https://displacedobjects.com/> is part of the project <https://nle.hypotheses.org/>



new grand narratives (Greenblatt 2010:16–17). In developing this publication project, we had in mind three possible directions of enquiry. Firstly, *Research on objects*: analysis of objects brought by migrants in the relational perspective, objects that have changed their social biotope and the reconfigurations and new status that this implies in terms of related practices. Secondly, *Research with objects*: analysis of objects used by researchers as tools in their interactions with the empirical field of research on Mediterranean migration (e.g. which photos are used during photo elicitation interviews? What is the relationship between researchers and the objects brought from their research field and/or with respondents who have offered objects to them?) as well as of objects which stimulate the ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills 1959). Finally, *Restitution by objects*: analysis of epistemological issues connected to creative and alternative (i.e. non-academic) restitutions of research by objects (Alexandre-Garner and Galitzine-Loumpet 2020).

Methodologically, we solicited pieces that explore different (auto)ethnographic practices of research (Reed-Danahay 2017) and writing (Ellis 1999), along with more traditional scientific articles and creative interventions. In this sense, the issue endorses a pluralist and polyphonic style of thinking, which is also expressed by the different languages used by the contributors (English, French, Italian). Concretely, we invited authors to focus on an object that is meaningful to them personally or to those they have met in their field of research. Finally, we decided to focus on the Mediterranean region, which has always been a place of multiple exchanges for people, ideas, and objects (Trivellato et al. 2014). These include objects of exile, such as those that migrants themselves have brought to Europe, but also objects in exile in the literal sense of the word, including material objects connected to trade and those brought to Europe during the colonial period. Indeed, issues concerning the restitution of African heritage by the European ex-colonial empires represent one of the angles from which to construct a socio-material landscape of these ‘migrant’ objects, their movement, and the socio-political practices connected to them (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

The contributions we present here explore the multiple dimensions of ‘what can be learnt from objects in the context of migration and exile’. By adopting different disciplinary perspectives, the articles can be interpreted through four main epistemological declensions. These encompass the object as therapeutic care and object of mediation; as heritage and archive; as testimony of absence; and as mirror of the self, of reflexivity, and of self-construction.

The Materialities of Be-longing: Objects in/of Exile across the Mediterranean opens with three articles that deal with contemporary migrations across the Mediterranean to Europe. What is the role of the object(s) that migrants bring with them in the often-traumatic experience of displacement and dis-location? Which temporal, spatial, and mental dimensions do objects in the context of migration reveal? Francesca Alemanno presents the case of Suryabhan, an Indian migrant who settled in Southern Italy. The migratory trajectory is investigated through the prism of his relationship with a sacred idol representing the God Ganesh, an object he brought directly from India. Alemanno combines analysis of the cultural dimension of the migratory experience – referred to in the article as the ‘culture of migration’ (Marshall 1982; Kandel & Massey 2002; Turco 2018) – with a critical perspective of material culture. In this way, the author unveils the different meanings with which the object is invested in the temporality (Rosales 2017) of the migration trajectory and in the development of Suryabhan as human being and as entrepreneur: not only a religious object and an artifact which mediates the rela-



relationship with (the absence of) the family of origin, but also a ‘device’ capable of promoting his self-confidence and taking him out of the existential stagnation into which he had fallen.

The vulnerability of the migratory condition is also explored by Catherine Thomas and Laure Levillayer, respectively a psychiatric nurse and an anthropologist. In the article *Objets de l’exil, objets de soins*, Thomas and Levillayer discuss their therapeutic practice with refugee or asylum seeker patients suffering from multiple traumas related to exile. In the context of clinical sessions, objects emerge as carriers of meanings and emotions that help the patients to reconstruct their psychic life and their social existence. Physically brought or simply recalled, objects have the potential to serve as therapeutic levers to re-establish internal security and open the individual towards the future. The transcultural consultations that Thomas and Levillayer describe allow us to glimpse what it means to pass through social isolation and psychological disorganisation in the context of migration and exile. More often, however, we ‘experience’ these human trajectories only through the mediation of images on the screen, where, in their most tragic form, they disappear under a white cloth.

Angela Viora’s visual essay invites us to reflect on how media, whilst bridging ‘physical and geographical distances, [...] may also accentuate the gap between reality and virtuality, blurring the line between “subjectness” and objectification’ (Viora in this issue). In the durational and live performance *The Foreigner – Unknown Unlabelled Unexpected* – which is discussed in the visual essay, Viora wanted to embody the disembodied images we see on screen. As she explained, the author-performer’s body lying on the ground of publicly accessible spaces elicited dynamics of empathy and alterity. By adopting the form of the visual essay, Viora offers to the readers the opportunity to immerse themselves in a similar experience at the intersection of image, object, body, and subject and ponder their own implication (Rothberg 2019) in the map of contemporary migrations across the Mediterranean.

In a perspective of *histoire croisée* (Werner, Zimmermann 2004), contemporary migrations can often be inscribed in the ‘ongoing and durable effects of colonial violence after decolonization’ (Navaro 2020: 167), that is – as Navaro puts it following Stoler (2013) – the ‘aftermath of colonialism’. Objects as ‘imperial debris’ (Stoler 2013), their persistence as things and metaphors, are addressed by Fabio Colonnese, Maria Grazie D’Amelio, and Lorenzo Grieco in a co-authored essay, as well as by Claudia Sbuttoni and, in the form of a collaborative visual essay, by Lilla Szasz and Elsa Peralta.

In *The Transfer of Architectural Heritage as a Transcultural Tool: The Case of the Obelisk of Aksum*, Colonnese, D’Amelio, and Grieco (respectively an architect and scholars of the history of architecture) discuss the relocation of the stele – transferred from Ethiopia to Italy in 1937 by the fascist regime as war booty – back to its original site in 2005. The transfer is framed within the history of movement and relocation of artworks and architecture, which since antiquity has been, as the authors recall, ‘the result of asymmetrical power relations in times of peace and war [...] and as such unjust’ (Colonnese, D’Amelio and Grieco, this issue). While acknowledging this political asymmetry and the symbolic value of the stele in the Italian colonial and postcolonial history, the authors focus on the technical challenges of the transportation of architectures, which is indeed one of the possible interpretations of the object itself (see Barbara Spadaro in Rossetto e Spadaro 2014). In the authors’ view, the return of the obelisk ‘prompted a process of knowledge transfer, opening new opportunities of cultural cooperation’ (Colonnese, D’Amelio and Grieco, this issue).



While the obelisk was claimed by its legitimate owners (the Ethiopian people), Claudia Sbuttoni's article takes its cue from unclaimed objects in the context of another 'aftermath of violence' (Navaro 2020): the post-WW2 Trieste borderland and its complex memoryscape. The objects which inspired Sbuttoni's essay are the belongings of Istrians who identified themselves as Italian and who left, between 1943 and 1956, the territories previously belonging to the Italian State. Bed frames, children's toys, trunks, aluminium cooking pots, wood-burning cast iron stoves, bathroom sinks, tools, children's school notebooks, ceramic dining sets, sewing machines, books, dark wooden wardrobes: the Magazzino 18, a warehouse at the old port of Trieste, is packed with all these relics. By discussing the tours organised at the Magazzino 18 by the Istituto Regionale per la Cultura Istriano-fiumano-dalmata (Regional Institute of Istrian-Fiumean-Dalmatian Culture, I.R.C.I.), Sbuttoni offers a critical reading of the construction of nationalistic memory in the Italian community displaced by the so called 'exodus' from Istria and Dalmatia after WW2. In *Unclaimed objects, reclaimed history: Magazzino 18 and the Istrian Exodus*, Sbuttoni illustrates how relics, otherwise mute, are mobilised to tell a certain story of collective memory and identity by former Italian refugees and how, eventually, 'the importance paid to the objects of the exodus act to obfuscate Italy's fascist past and minimise Italy's role in the second World War' (Sbuttoni, this issue).

Like the relics featured in Sbuttoni's essay, the plethora of material spoils found in Lisbon's flea market or in forgotten personal archives lead us to explore what remains today of the Portuguese colonial history: 'a memorial field fraught with fractures, traumas and silences' (Peralta 2019). In *TRACES. A visual essay with photography by Lilla Szász and words by Elsa Peralta*, the authors invite us to follow the 'memory traces of an illegitimate history' (Peralta and Szász, this issue). Letters sent from Madrinhas de Guerra (Godmothers of War) to soldiers in the former colonies, negatives of photographs which remained unclaimed, and photo albums in which only captions remain are assembled in Szász's photographic practice. The visual essay displays the connection between the objects, i.e. the fragments, of an untold past and the present of the artist and the questions that inhabit her. As she looks at the photo albums without images, she asks: 'What is a caption without an image? What is the function of a photo album? What do we wish to preserve with it? Do they still form our memory of the past?' (Peralta and Szász, this issue).

These questions deeply resonate with Michèle Baussant's poignant essay on objects lost and left behind by Egyptian Jews. By taking inspiration from a bronze plaque on a synagogue bench in Cairo that carries the name of its former owner, Youssef Ades, Baussant delves into the complex layers of remembering and forgetting, of being present and absent, experienced by Jews who 'came out of Egypt, but have been unable to bring Egypt out of themselves' (Baussant, this issue). In her long ethnographic work with Egyptian Jews in Egypt and in the many countries where they settled, Baussant observed how, like 'phantom limbs', artifacts and objects left behind often 'take on more importance and space than the objects carried into exile' (Baussant, this issue). The 'stickiness', to use Baussant's metaphor, of this past to the present (the present of Egyptians and of Egyptian Jews), challenges any interpretation exclusively based on the binary identifications framed by nationalisms. Moreover, it urges us to, in Baussant's view, assume our own responsibility vis-à-vis a heritage of which we are not just 'passive receivers' (de l'Estoile 2008).



The story of Pedatzur Benattia, an Israeli of Libyan descent, presented by Giordano Bottechia in the form of an interview, offers an example of another diasporic Judaism, namely Libyan Jewry, and the value assigned to objects in the effort to 'preserve' them. Benattia could be defined as an 'entrepreneur de mémoire' (Noiriel 2004 ; Trevisan Semi 2006) who has, for decades now, actively researched, collected, and bought items belonging to the Jewish community in Libya. The collection he has put together includes objects (especially religious) brought by Jews from Libya at the time of their emigration to Israel as well as items that were left in Libya (which he has managed to buy and transfer to Israel). In 1995 Benattia established the Or Shalom Centre (Centre for the Preservation and Transmission of the Heritage of the Jews of Libya) with the aim of creating a museum of Libyan Jewry. His efforts in support of the establishment of a common, public memory of Libyan Jews were deeply influenced by his own personal story, as he is a descendant of a Libyan Jewish family. Public activism and personal biography intertwine in Benattia's trajectory as entrepreneur de mémoire, a passion that started as a childhood inclination for old objects but soon took on a communal dimension.

This personal dimension of Benattia's activism offers an ideal connection to the concluding essays of the issue, in which objects feature as mirrors of the self and levers of (self)reflexivity. Dario Miccoli presents a (self)reflection on the role that books have played for Jews along the southern shore of the Mediterranean during colonial and postcolonial times. A book he has never read, *Storia politica, civile, militare della dinastia di Savoia dalle prime origini a Vittorio Emanuele II* by Francesco Predari, inspired Miccoli to reflect on his own journey as a scholar of Jews of early twentieth-century Egypt (Miccoli 2015). Mixing historical analysis with ego-historical reflections, the essay looks at books 'as mirrors of the plurality of (Jewish) identities and memories that can be traced in the Mediterranean up until the 1950s and 1960s and, in different ways, until today' (Miccoli, this issue).

Like the book that Miccoli never read, the tennis racket discussed by Martino Oppizzi is also a specific and yet apparently anonymous object. However, in the recollections of its owner, a Tunisian Jew named Carlo U., it functions as signifier of an entire social world and its rules. In *The Rules of the Game: Tennis, Clubs and Postcolonial Society in the Memory of an Italian Immigrant From Tunisia*, Oppizzi offers an original analysis of the 'sociability' of the elites in post-colonial Tunisia from a micro-historical perspective. The Tunis Tennis Club, in fact, represented a 'significant continuity between the colonial period and independence, particularly in the eyes of the Italian bourgeoisie to which Carlo belonged' (Oppizzi, this issue). Although a material object that can be replicated, the tennis racket is invested in Carlo's narrative with a complex stratification of multiple belongings and eventually provides a unique access 'to the geographical, emotional and social anchor points' of the interviewee's past before his emigration to Italy.

Addis Ababa-Florence: round trip. Story of three letters and a photo by Emanuela Trevisan Semi closes this collection dedicated to researching the entanglement of 'materiality, agency, and subjecthood' (Dini 2017: 3) in the context of exile and migration. Trevisan Semi's essay deals with the history of the Beta Israel (Falasha, Jews of Ethiopia), of which Trevisan Semi is a renowned scholar. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Beta Israel attracted the philanthropic attention of several European Jewish institutions, which were eager to provide them with a 'modern, Western' education. Young Ethiopian Jews were thus sent to study in Palestine or in European capitals, such as Vienna or Paris, so that they may later become educators and teachers back in their native country. In this essay, Trevisan Semi concentrates on the life



trajectory of one of these, Menghistu Isaac, and dwells in particular on the dramatic situation in which he found himself during the Second World War, during which he was forced to ask for help, in the letters presented by Trevisan Semi, from Italian co-religionaries. Trevisan Semi interprets the letters as ancient palimpsests on which several layers of history overlap, and she reminds us of the responsibility we bear to decipher 'the density of their meanings, both explicit and implicit' (Trevisan Semi, this issue).

The circumstances that led Trevisan Semi to re-open the boxes of an archive built over forty years of research inspire the concluding remarks of this introduction. Over the years, Trevisan Semi has been repeatedly asked by the descendants of the young Beta Israel she researched for documents and details about their great-grandparents and other relatives. Some of these young men, who crossed the Mediterranean or left their villages for Addis Ababa with the promise to become 'illustrious and famous people' (Summerfield 2003: 175), 'had tragic stories, since they had died, often in conditions of great solitude and abandonment, of depression, tuberculosis and other diseases' (Trevisan Semi, this issue).

These tragic stories resonate with the essays which opened this issue: with the vulnerability of the migratory condition, with the existential stagnation into which migrants might fall, with the multiple traumas related to exile. At the umpteenth request from a Beta Israel descendant, Trevisan Semi reopened the numerous boxes of her archive, and this request prompted her 'to pore again over that precious material [...] in the hope of creating generational and cultural bridges for the Beta Israel whose memories of their past in Ethiopia had faded after they had emigrated to Israel' (Trevisan Semi, this issue). What if, we wonder, one day the descendants of those who are crossing the Mediterranean today turn to scholars and ask for documents and details about their relatives? This brings us back to the question of the archive: Which kind of archives are we building? How should we exploit and conserve them, how should we patrimonialize these objects and the memories that make them singular?

The present issue aims to question the links that individuals in exile, researchers, and more widely societies have with objects – these non-humans charged with meanings that change according to context and temporality. It is possible to wonder if these links participate in 'convergences', in a common memorial regime, despite their singularities and heterogeneities? Do they form an archipelago 'under the double figure of the rooting of each one, here and now, and of common features which draw, in spite of everything, a whole' (Amar, Bertheleu & Teulière, 2015, 16, our translation),⁴ or do they create a constellation (Banti 2000 ; Ben-Yehoyada 2015 ; Baussant 2019 ; Rossetto 2021) which unspools itself beneath the gaze of the researcher?

The multidisciplinary evocations presented in this issue allow us to question the dialectic between singular and common at different scales: that of individuals' own socialisations and their interactions with and via objects and society on the one hand, and that of the articulation of the singularity of 'case' research and the construction of general theoretical frameworks specific to the social sciences and creation reflexivity on the other. Like windows on migrant conditions, with contrasting landscapes, the study of objects in and of exile finally sheds light on the contemporary stakes of democratic constructions and the place that these reserve for migrant objects and, more generally, subjects.

⁴ « sous la double figure de l'enracinement de chacune, ici et maintenant, et de traits communs qui dessinent malgré tout, un ensemble » (Amar, Bertheleu & Teulière, 2015, 16).



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