

Objects in Transition

Gisela Ecker

What we are given to see in *What We Brought with Us* are things¹ chosen by their owners in a state of duress, things chosen to accompany them at a time of dramatic disruption and life-changing upheaval. Separated from their habitual surroundings, these things seemingly have to fulfill a range of purposes that extend from the functional to the emotional and, like their owners, are traveling from one place to another. They are objects in transition. Moreover, they are being presented through photographic representation and in a manner that is, in principle, accessible to everyone. The objects are encompassed by a profoundly generalizable narrative—the exilic condition of their owners—and, in addition, they are accompanied by some basic information about their past and reflections that illuminate why they have been selected and retained.

First shown online as part of the *Re:Writing the Future Festival*, then at the National Literaturarchiv Marbach in Germany, and, in 2023, at the University of Cincinnati's Meyers Gallery and the Goethe-Institut in New York, the *What We Brought with Us* exhibition has had access to a wide public. Most of these viewers have not undergone the dramatic and often traumatizing experience of exile. No doubt their first and most intense reaction derives from a sense of personal identification and compassion

1 In this text, I refer to “objects” to aim at generalized aspects and to “things” to highlight connections between thing and person, sometimes even synonymously. The scholarly debate over these terms has not arrived at any single conclusion, and it is beyond the scope of this essay to rehearse the discussion here. For a brief overview, see Candlin and Guins (2009), Part II.

for the exiled owners of these things, prompting the question, “Which things would I choose were I thrown into a situation like this?”

In the exhibition, each object stands out monolithically against a dark background; the photographs are taken with great care and artistic skill, with special attention given to a sense of materiality and the surface qualities of the object. In some cases, such as in the **baby shoe** or **coffee cups**, the mode of ambitious portrayal seems to contradict the worn-out or “ordinary” nature of the thing. The unusual valorization implied in this photographic approach confers and mirrors the revaluation the things have already received by being singled out from their original contexts and chosen as significant objects and companions. In the exhibition catalogue, photographic thumbnails are added to the wide-angle shots of the objects, thereby heightening the impact of each precious thing.

The displayed objects do not share any basic classifications, such as object of use, souvenir, or artifact. Their only common feature is the fate they share with their owners after having been singled out, most probably under great emotional strain, intensified by limitations of time, luggage allowance, and other circumstances.

“Telling Objects”

Some of the assembled things lend themselves quite easily to a symbolic reading because their type can be found within general (Western) cultural archives and because they have a rich life in poetry and the visual arts. The **torch**, **watch**, and **alarm clock**, for example, are generally seen as wayfinding instruments that allow people to orient themselves in time and space, and thus, as concepts, they inspire further abstraction.² Traditional hermeneutics, in fact, tends to assign a more or less fixed meaning to objects in general. This process of attributing meaning to things has been increasingly criticized in recent decades and is even regarded as a potential act of appropriation when applied to material things and

2 See, for example, Şenocak (2006).

their living context. Historian of science Lorraine Daston, for example, in her introduction to *Things That Talk* (2004), raises the question of how apparently “speechless” non-human objects can be turned into “telling objects” if asked appropriate questions.³ As Daston puts it, it is necessary to “confront the paradox head-on and... take it for granted that things are simultaneously material and meaningful” (17). Following Daston’s suggestion, one of the demands of such a practice would be ongoing and thorough recontextualization. Simply put, the torch, watch, and alarm clock need not stay fixed in a single category. Symbolic meaning cannot claim to be exhaustive but can easily coexist with other and ever-changing meanings: things can at once be objects of practical use and, simultaneously, serve as reminders of their personally attributed symbolic value.

If we take seriously Daston’s claims about things, that “their utterances are never disembodied” and that they “communicate by what they are as well as by how they mean” (20), then material cultural studies has a lot to contribute and many new issues to pursue. This potential can be seen in many of the exhibited things, perhaps most strikingly in the **baby shoe**.

Mementoes and the “Production of Locality”

To learn more about objects taken along into exile, we have to look at approaches adopted by anthropologists who study transnational movements. With his focus on global population shifts and the subsequent “deterritorialization” of ever-increasing numbers of people, Arjun Appadurai (1998, 27) has opened avenues for looking at both human subjects *and* things in transition. Both “deterritorialization” and subsequent “reterritorialization” are processes that are dramatically shaping our globalized world, with exile being a violent, disrupting, and traumatic manifestation of enforced dislocation and relocation. “Production of locality,” the term Appadurai uses to refer to acts of

3 See also Kimmich (2011).

reterritorialization (1998, 178–200), distinctly moves us away from the traditional notion of *Heimat* (see Ecker 2012), with its static beliefs about time and homogeneous social structures. Whereas Appadurai's concept of "locality" is viewed "as primarily relational and contextual," the corollary term "neighborhood" refers "to the actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized" (1998, 178–79). Things play an indispensable role in these processes; people and things are torn away from their habitual surroundings and subsequently become involved in the "production of locality" (178–79), i.e., in actively establishing new neighborhoods in which they will have to find and construct new places where the old and new will mingle and interact with each other.

Whereas migration usually allows for more planning time and larger volumes of things to be transferred across borders, exile is dominated by pressures and extreme restrictions at all levels. The use value of objects (the literature on migration often stereotypically mentions pots and featherbeds) gives way to other forms of value. In his essay on transitional objects, anthropologist David Parkin writes about objects in the context of "forcible human displacement": "items taken under pressure and in crisis set up contexts less of use and more of selective remembering, forgetting and envisioning" (1999, 304). Items come to serve "as mementoes of sentiment and cultural knowledge and yet also as bases of future re-settlement"; in this way, "the 'transitional objects' carried by peoples in crisis inscribe their personhood in flight but offer the possibility of their own de-objectification and re-personalization afterwards" (303). In the eyes of their owners, these mementoes are "inscribed with narrative and sentiment, which may later re-articulate the shifting boundaries of a socio-cultural identity" (313).

Appadurai's and Parkin's positions encompass the past and the projected future of objects in transition along a spatial and temporal axis on both sides of the violent disruption of exile. Torn from their normal existence in ensembles, things will be included in new ensembles where they interrelate with other things in the processes of homemaking. These insights raise many questions to pose to the things isolated by circumstances and gathered in *What We Brought with Us*. From which neighbor-

hood has each object been separated and singled out? We know that they have been highly valorized and selected by their owners, yet which roles did they play in the company of other things and in the context of their original homes? What practical uses, atmospheric and aesthetic value, and familiar patterns and habits in everyday life were accorded them? And subsequently, what will they contribute to the neighborhoods they are about to enter? As objects of transition, they have been excised, artistically portrayed, and exhibited at precisely the moment between these two processes in the “production of locality.”

Biographies of Things

While it may seem like an act of anthropomorphizing, applying notions of a “biography of things” seems particularly appropriate in this context. Igor Kopytoff sketches the issues at stake:

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its “status” and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (1986, 66–67)

Within their lifetimes, things rarely remain fixed within a single category but are subject to many shifts in classification (see Hahn 2005, 40–45). Categories, such as household tool, garbage, museum artifact, souvenir, commodity, memento, or gift, do not originate in the things themselves. Rather, they are the result of human attribution, either by explicit labels or implicitly. Such attributions are made according to the ways in which things are used by humans, in keeping with their

habits, via the neighborhoods in which they have been positioned, and commensurate with their evaluation by cultural norms that are subject to historical change. The value attached to things is neither totally subjective nor quite objective, for value follows what is generally attributed to things in a specific culture and, in addition, the individual subject creates a personal order within the ensemble of things he or she owns. This fundamental ambivalence becomes heightened if we look at single things taken across borders and into exile.

In her novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Dubravka Ugrešić (1996) traces the steps of exiled things and regularly arrives at a world of absences: “Exile is the history of the things we leave behind, of buying and abandoning hair-driers, cheap little radios, coffee pots” (113). Things taken into exile bear witness to loss (see Kimmich 2011, 9–13). Yet to substitute or stand in for what has been left behind is a role too demanding for the things taken on the journey, impossible to fulfill. Maybe this accounts for the aura some of the things seem to radiate.

In general, the lives of things—with their life cycles and paths depending on materiality, on the emotional and practical services they provide—only rarely fully coincide with the biographies of their owners. In contrast, the things under discussion here are destined to share their trajectories most closely with their owners, who have chosen them as portable companions into exile. Thus, at least for the time being, i.e., during the period of passage, most of them have undergone a radical revaluation, even if this act of selection may have been performed under great pressure and more spontaneously and unconsciously than through deliberate calculation. Moreover, it is often only in retrospect that such things can be seen in a different light and move from useful tool to memento. Such a striking change of category is observable in the case of the **white fabric**, originally handed over by the person’s mother to secure the suitcase with its broken zip. For me, this is a moving instance of a powerful transformation from useful tool to memento.

“Transitional Objects” in Psychology

“Transitional objects” is a term originally coined by Donald Winnicott to explain young children’s use of objects like blankets and teddy bears to bridge the absence of a caring person. The term has also been found useful in the discussion of forceful separation such as exile, when objects are chosen to provide emotional or practical assistance—to convey a spark of hope and a sense of continuity in situations of despair, upheaval, and disruption from everything that once provided those feelings of security and well-being. In his book *Geliebte Objekte*, psychologist Tilmann Habermas (1999) examines things in people’s “emotional households” and provides detailed insights into the uses of objects in situations of extreme change and disruption. Although there are many designations available—for example, “*rite-de-passage* souvenirs”—he, like Parkin (1999), seizes upon “transitional objects” as the appropriate term. According to Habermas’s research, things that facilitate transition serve most frequently to carry forward deep-rooted relationships with people who had to be left behind. This is clearly mirrored in *What We Brought with Us*, where it is not merely the thing that is transmitted but the specific relationship that it evokes and the memories contained therein. Specifically, the **torch**, **watch**, **alarm clock**, **handwritten letter**, **white fabric**, **dupatta**, **child’s shoe**, **sock**, **coffee cups**, **ultrasound**, and **notebooks** are all accompanied by narratives that highlight special personal relationships. If we look more closely, the majority of these things were given as gifts and thus, according to central notions of gifts and gift-giving, retain something of the giver of the gift, and of his or her intention and personal attitude. Quite similar to processes of mourning, the gift, which once literally rested in the hands of the giver, is believed to retain some of these tactile traces.

Like a powerful framing narrative, the **ultrasound** is especially strong in setting up a sense of continuity between past and present. In the case of the **child’s shoe** and the **sock**, there is no possible return to their erstwhile use value, whereby the objects might be carried into everyday life. Within the collection, the pieces of **fur**, specifically, stand out as a form of relic.

“Continuity with oneself” (1999, 302) is the wider concept Habermas considers as the main underlying purpose of transitional objects. This can be found in the ritual function of the **amber**, a function created through habit, and the **T-shirt**, **dupatta**, and **toy bear**. The carefully wrapped **keypad phone** is destined to serve as a reminder of extreme political repression, whereas the **Venetian silk purse**, like an anecdote, stands for the fraught moment of crossing borders.

Beyond Nostalgia

As we learn from the accompanying narratives in *What We Brought with Us*, a significant number of things have been chosen because of their value as mementoes. If we look more closely, “memento” can mean many things. The future role of mementoes is frequently seen in their value as nostalgic objects that evoke the past. In her study *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym insists that the popular notion of nostalgia, which tends to idealize the past, has to be expanded beyond its common definition as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (viii). Applied to things taken into exile, such a narrow view of nostalgia is, according to Boym, extremely limiting, for it privileges the idea of a homogeneous cultural sphere in both the past and the present. Such homogenization no longer corresponds to the vast human displacement that characterizes the world today. Finally, things defined as nostalgic objects may end up displayed in what Boym calls “little bookshelf museums” (333). In Boym’s research and fieldwork, the stories told by the owners of classical “nostalgic objects” “reveal more about making a home abroad than about reconstructing the original loss” (328): “Diasporic souvenirs do not reconstruct the narrative of one’s roots but rather tell the story of exile” (336). She reminds us that mementoes are never just nostalgic objects but are supposed to play a sustaining role in the future life of their owners. The **toy bear**, for example, would certainly deserve a future place on the shelf and serve as a powerful reminder of different phases of the owner’s past life. Thus, in looking at *What We Brought with Us*, we may well ask which roles these mementoes will play in the future

lives of their owners. Will such things as the **alarm clock** or **keychain** resume their practical uses, on top of remaining a thing that carries loving memories? And will the **sock** be reunited with its counterpart? In contemporary literature,⁴ we find countless examples of such a blending and accumulation of services, practical and emotional, in things taken into exile.

The Comfort of Things (Miller 2008)

In Daniel Miller's anthropological study of the things found in households of a randomly selected, "entirely ordinary-looking street" in London, his questions were posed not only to the chosen householders, but also, and mainly, to the things accumulated and positioned in the interiors of the houses—the collections on the mantelpiece or decorations on the wall. His central assumption was that "these things are not a random collection. They have been gradually accumulated as an expression of that person or household. Surely if we can learn to listen to these things we have access to an authentic other voice" (2008, 2). Since most of the residents in his study were marked by personal histories of migration and exile, Miller's fieldwork offers valuable insights into the possible future lives of things once they have been integrated into new ensembles: how things relating to a painful past mingle with others, how they combine emotional reminiscence with practical use, and how they speak of relationships both with people and with each other. Their implicit messages can, in other words, differ from the explicit statements and evaluations made by their owners. Here, we are back to Daston's (2004) seminal position—and also more informative, as, according to Miller, "apparently mute forms can be made to speak more easily and eloquently to the nature of relationships than can those with persons" (287). To their owners, it is exactly the interplay and combination of things—even in, and maybe because of, their repetitive presence—that

4 See, for example, the cutting knife in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" (1999) or the handkerchief in Herta Müller's Nobel Prize speech (2009).

provide comfort and a sense of private and safe surroundings. Having learned from Latour (2009) about the complexities of the interplay between humans and non-humans, we find intricate interrelations in the specific context of *What We Brought with Us*: as transitional objects, non-human things have been delegated the immense task of bridging a gaping emotional gap. They have other tasks, too, tasks originating from their biographies. They will continue to shape everyday human actions together with their new non-human companions and speak of embedded lives in narratives enlarging those that derive from their owners.

Again, looking at our collection of “forlorn” and isolated things, the onlookers who have not undergone this experience of dramatic dislocation gain a sense of the enormous losses borne by the subjects of exile. At the same time, these things offer insights into the equally enormous task of re-establishing personal surroundings that provide comfort. Which place and role will our things find in their new neighborhoods of things?

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