

Migrants' Belongings: Preliminary considerations of Greek and Italian migrants' travel trunks in the post-Second World War period of settlement to South Australia

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The *Migrants' Belongings* project, while considering both the scholarly work of the past and more contemporary trends, aims to take migration studies one step further by investigating the significance of belongings brought in the travel trunks of Greek and Italian migrants when they settled in Australia after the Second World War. The project seeks to understand, in the context of displacement, movement and loss, what objects were of particular relevance in reshaping the lives and the identities of these migrants, with particular reference to those objects carried by trunk, rather than by suitcase.

This article, the first in a series relating to the *Migrants' Belongings* project, aims to situate the project within the wider literature of post-Second World War Italian and Greek migration to Australia. It will consider the use and representation of migrants' belongings, drawing on methodologies and findings from museology, material culture and identity studies. The project will reflect on the reasons why the "objects of migration", and more specifically the contents of "migrant trunks", have so far been largely neglected by scholars of history and migration studies. Finally, this article will highlight the project's proposed methodology.

Keywords: migrants, belongings, Greeks, Italians, Australia.

Introduction

When reading migration histories, one constantly encounters individual and collective tales of courage and tenacity. The push and pull factors that have historically driven

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Antique trunk brought to Australia by a female immigrant from the island of Rhodes, Greece. The trunk is hand-made and hand-carved locally at the village of Malona, Rhodes.



Hand-carved detail of the trunk's front

individuals and families to travel across the world, sometimes in dangerous conditions and often with a large degree of uncertainty, have been the subject of many studies. Scholars of more recent migrations have tried to capture, primarily through oral testimony, the emotional dimension of migration and the obstacles, real and perceived, that migrants face as they settled in the host countries. In recent years, influenced by *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1991), migration scholarship has been concerned with migrant identity. In concert with this new focus, a more recent trend has seen the consideration of material culture becoming increasingly significant in studies of the construction and representation of the self.

The *Migrants' Belongings* project,² while considering both the scholarly work of the past and more contemporary trends, aims to take migration studies one step further as it seeks to investigate identity and belonging through the significance of objects brought in the travel trunks of Greek and Italian migrants when they settled in South Australia in the post-Second World War period. This study seeks to understand, in the context of displacement, movement and loss, what objects came to be of

² This project is being undertaken by the Department of Language Studies (School of Humanities), Flinders University, South Australia.

particular relevance in reshaping the lives and the identities of these migrants, with particular reference to those objects carried by trunk, rather than by suitcase. The authors have chosen to focus on the “trunk” because it might be seen to embody a sense of permanent settlement in the new place, unlike the “suitcase”, which contains more transient belongings of first necessity. If then, as Burrell (2008:362) argues, the suitcase represents a “powerful image in migration studies strongly associated with loss, trauma and displacement”, what more can be understood about identity and belonging through the larger and more enduring statement of migration represented by the objects packed in the trunk?

For Italian and Greek migrants setting out in the post-Second World War years for the other side of the world, perhaps with little chance of return, the belongings they took held great significance. Certainly these trunks carried everyday objects such as household items, clothes, books, and toys, but they also contained textiles (such as traditional costumes, fabrics), family heirlooms, photographs, religious objects, and, for wives, fiancées and proxy brides, dowries and glory boxes containing hand-made items from a pre-manufacturing tradition. For many of these young women, dowry items were seen as a measure of skill and worth as a suitable bride. Importantly, in a situation of crisis, such as being uprooted from one's country of birth, objects play a significant role in helping overcome the traumatic experience of dislocation. They help in remembering and recreating the former place of residence. As objects of comfort, they help in building a sense of security. They become important in reshaping self, as markers of heritage, ethnicity, and both past and emergent identity/ies.

Migrants carefully selected these objects for their cultural value in ascribing identity, their utility, and for what other traditional meanings they represented. They were not simply passive and disposable commodities. Often irreplaceable in the far away new land, and always carrying memories of home and self, they were therefore precious to their owners. The objects undertook not just a physical journey but a metaphysical one as well, carrying meaning, memories and stories, and served as bridges between the old home and the new.

Beyond their personal meanings, migrants' belongings also have broader heritage significance, as they provide important information about the social and cultural practices of individuals and community groups. As such, they may be seen as evolving narratives and classified as “movable cultural heritage”, telling of people's experiences of migration on the margin of official historical enquiry.

Through the investigation of migrants' belongings, the research team is broadly interested in finding out how the objects that migrants brought with them to Australia functioned as vehicles for life narratives as well as cultural and social connectors between their country of birth and their new environment. More specifically, the project seeks to investigate what motivated the choice of particular objects; how those chosen objects function as markers of identities, values and rituals; and how the meaning of objects changed over time, as they moved from one country to another, from one person to another, and from one generation to the next.

This article aims to situate the *Migrants' Belongings* project within the wider literature of post-Second World War Italian and Greek migration to Australia. It considers the use and representation of migrants' belongings, drawing on methodologies and findings from museology, material culture and identity studies. It also considers why the "objects of migration", and more specifically the contents of "migrant trunks", have so far been largely neglected by scholars of history and migration studies, even though they have been exhibited and significantly explored since the 1980s by museums such as the Migration Museum in Adelaide.

The Migrants' Belongings project is significant for two main reasons. Firstly, its data will be collected from first generation migrants now in their 70s and 80s, whose cultural knowledge and personal memories are in danger of being lost to both academic inquiry and community heritage. Secondly, the objects themselves are at risk of being forgotten, lost, or dispersed, and the meaning they carry dissipated in transmission to subsequent generations. Just as the *kofforts* (trunks) of the nineteenth-century Icelandic migrants to Canada are belatedly being saved from junk shops, studied and preserved (Bertram, 2010), the present study is timely in terms of the material preservation and stewardship of these objects. While information from the historic past can be reconstructed to a degree, the potential for understanding of migrant narratives is much greater when knowledge and information can be obtained from migrants themselves. The project aims to capture, through the process of oral testimony, first person narratives about the journey and the content of the travel trunks, in order to situate the individual within the framework of cultural belonging, core values, personal or family history and transnational identity.

Italians and Greeks — Post-Second World War migration to Australia

In the years immediately following the Second World War, the Australian population was in decline and fertility rates were falling. Australia looked to Europe to increase its population through migration. Post-war migrants to Australia entered into a new "social revolution" strongly led by Australia's first minister for immigration, Arthur Calwell. Although, as Richards (2008:200) argues, some European migrants were ultimately treated as second-class citizens, mass migration resulted in a more diverse population and was the beginning of the multiculturalism yet to come.

Amongst post-war migrants were large numbers of Italians and Greeks. Helped by the lifting of previous entry requirements such as sponsorship and monetary stipulations, three-quarters of Italian and Greek migrants in this period arrived unassisted, having funded their own journeys, sometimes with the help and sponsorship of their kin and *paesani* (regional compatriots) already in Australia. Although in South Australia a majority of post-war Italian immigrants came to join friends and relatives from pre-war migrations, others arrived independently. Census figures that show 1,489 Italian-born people resided in the state in 1933, climbing to 32,428 at the peak

of migration in 1971 (O'Connor, 2004:57). This twentyfold increase in the Italian population in less than 40 years shows the strength of chain migration, which had the effect of creating local settlements of Italians who had migrated from specific regions and towns in Italy. Indeed, regional and town loyalties are still deeply evident within the Italian communities in Australia and are significant elements to consider in understanding their historical, sociological and cultural differences.

Studies indicate that the identity of Italians and Greeks arriving in Australia was potentially more complex than simple labels of nationality indicate. Italians, for instance, did not make up a single homogeneous and cohesive community, but rather a number of communities based on pre-migration traditions and regional ties. Coming from the hardships of post-war Europe, some were limited in their destination of choice by their status as refugees of war. Others were already struggling with issues of identity connected with displacement and with previous migration and expatriation experiences. Gardini (2004) points out that, after the war, a number of Italians came to South Australia under the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) settlement scheme from the contested regions in the north east, especially Venezia Giulia, and as such were often officially listed as Yugoslavian. Many were amongst the earliest arrivals, transported on troop ship carriers without cabins and with limited baggage that did not include trunks. Correspondingly, Tamis (2005) draws attention to the fact that not all immigrants classified as Greek in this period came directly from Greece itself. A considerable number of migrants were in fact part of an ongoing migration from other regions such as Egypt and the Near East, South Africa and Latin America.

Many migrants therefore carried what Richards (2008:168) calls "psychic" baggage as well as physical baggage, and hence the contents of their trunks may well represent the dual meaning of the word "belongings". How did these migrants perceive their identity? What material objects did they bring that represented this identity, and how were these objects influenced by their contested identities and transportation limitations? Many came to join family and friends already present. Consequently, was their physical baggage influenced, as was the baggage of Icelanders to Canada, by the knowledge passed to them in letters home (Bertram, 2010:40–41)? Does the extant literature on Italian and Greek migrants to Australia help us to answer these questions?

The studies on these two migrant groups in Australia have used a broad brush approach. Details about the post-Second World War period are often part of a larger general history of national migration such as in *The Italians in Australia* (Cresciani, 2003), or *The Greeks in Australia* (Tamis, 2005). They are concerned with exploring the emotions of the immigrants or providing a narrative about the processes of migration. The objects they brought with them are only mentioned in passing,³ and

³ As in Loh's collection of Italian women's stories, *With Courage in their Cases*: such as Annetta's comments that "[m]y mother carried me all across the world, her handbag in one hand, luggage in the other, and me on her arm" (Loh, 1980:18).

project informants are rarely questioned explicitly about the belongings that made the journey with them. Similarly, *Greek Women in South Australian Society 1923–1993* (Xenophou, 1994), a collection of stories constructed through interviews with Greek women, focuses on when the women arrived and by what means; where they settled and what they thought of Australia; what the greatest difficulties were; how life in Australia compared to life in Greece; and enquiries as to return visits and regrets about coming. There are no specific questions about identity or belongings and consequently there are few references to the objects of migration.

One wonders what was in the luggage carried by these migrants. The gaps in the literature suggest how much more could be learned about the times of “sacrifice, failure, delusion, suffering, alienation, discrimination, isolation, poverty and nostalgia” (Cresciani, 2003:143) by asking questions about what the Italians and Greeks brought with them as symbols of home, to guide them in their new life. Amongst those who have considered this question in several different migration contexts are museum curators and scholars from the emerging field of museology.

Migrants’ belongings and museum exhibitions

The museum, and particularly the migration museum, is an important custodian of both the objects and the stories of migration. When objects are collected by a museum, the meaning of the object is altered from the meaning it held in the household of its previous owner. When objects are formally collected, displayed, and their stories told, their meanings can be, and are, constructed in many ways. Their interpretation depends on factors such as the nature of the objects themselves, the curatorial aims and approach to the exhibition, the intended audience, the relationship between the museum and the community, and the political context which dictates the migrant narrative.

In Australia, where the present study is situated, migration museums have undergone dramatic changes since the opening of the first migration museum in Adelaide in 1986. As civic entities, migration museums have played an essential part in representing narratives of migration and cultural diversity in Australia. After decades of the White Australia Policy⁴ and cultural assimilation, multiculturalism was introduced by the Whitlam Labor government in the 1970s. Such a radical concept required the cultural re-education of a predominantly white Anglo-Saxon population brought up with the idea of a monocultural Australia. Museums embraced multiculturalism by celebrating post-war migrants’ contributions to Australia’s cultural mosaic, thus supporting the government’s political agenda (Witcomb, 2009:50).

In an attempt to move away from the all-celebratory “melting pot” social model, in which little attention was paid to the historical context of migration and where

⁴ White Australia Policy refers to a number of policies aiming to restrict immigration into Australia to white immigration only. It was implemented throughout the 20th century and was eventually abolished by the Whitlam federal government in 1973.

migrants were typically portrayed as “victim-heroes – stick figures”⁵ some museums, such as the National Museum of Australia (NMA), set their migration exhibitions in a historical and political framework. The migrant narrative was no longer an ahistorical individual event, but rather a long-term collective one, grounded in history and influenced by governmental policies and rhetoric (Hutchinson, 2009:71). Such a critical view of the Australian consensual nation-building narrative was severely criticised, in the case of the NMA, when the museum was reviewed in 2003, under the conservative Howard government. As a result, the NMA altered its approach by disengaging from the history of migration altogether (Witcomb, 2009:62).

Other museums, such as the Migration Museum in Adelaide, tried to debunk the myth of the “happy migrant” in an effort to educate a misinformed public as to the often-cruel realities of migration. The exhibition *A Twist of Fate* opened in 1998, and took visitors on journeys of fear, trauma, and survival through the stories of refugees. Although certainly ahead of its time in its approach and intention, the exhibition received little media attention in a political context dominated by the worsening situation of refugees, a growing number of whom were interned in detention camps (Szekeres, 2011:47).

It has become difficult for museums to adopt either the pluralistic or the consensual view of migration, as each narrative is highly politicised. Museums are not places where knowledge is transmitted in a one-way fashion, as all museum visitors bring with them their prior knowledge, cultural understandings, their life experience and their imagination, which they apply to the objects to shape their museum experience (Petrov, 2012:240).

In the current context, perhaps, as suggested by Witcomb (2009:64), the way forward is to talk about shared and individual experiences and enact diversity rather than attempt to teach it. Witcomb’s model is based on a strong sense of participation by the audience and the use of affect to draw visitors into an interaction with the conceptual framework and the artefacts.

One example of such a dialogic dimension is *Migration Memories*, an exhibition curated by Mary Hutchinson (shown in Lightning Ridge in August 2006 and in Robinvale in June 2007), which was based on a dynamic “folding approach to exhibiting” rather than on the traditional and more static mosaic approach (Hutchinson, 2009:75). Hutchinson’s dialogic exhibition stressed the personal, historical and local, and invited the audience to participate in the migration experience. The theoretical framework of *Migration Memories*, which relied on empowering objects and using them as agents of interpretation, could constitute a potent model to apply to our own project and to the way we conceive a future public display of the objects that this study considers.

Objects are recognisably “both tangible parts of our past as well as of our present because of the feelings and images with which they are invested or that they are able

⁵ Hutchinson, 2009:71.

to ‘evoke’” (Albano, 2007:17). Yet while the study of material culture, of “things”, is dominant in disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology, there are few direct studies of immigrant “objects” and “things” outside of the museum context, particularly in the historical sense. Cultural objects are frequently displayed in museums, where their meaning is constructed firstly by the nature of the museum itself (scientific or art museum, for instance), and secondly by curatorial decision-making about the way objects are presented and interpreted. There is a range of scholarly views in this regard. For example, in his article, “Civic Laboratories”, Bennett (2005) compares the role of the museum to that of a laboratory, and argues that the reconfiguration of the relations between objects, and between objects and people, has changed. There is, he argues, a recent trend to “refashion museums so that they might function as instruments for the promotion of cultural diversity” (Bennett, 2005:521). This notion is supported by Bertram (2010:41) who describes how, in the 1960s, the Canadian government actively supported and campaigned for expressions of multiculturalism. This interpretation was echoed in other museums and provides a modern example of how a “state inflicted” history affects practice and ideas.

Presentation of another type is evident in *Other Spaces*, a creative arts exhibition and project based on migrant objects on display at Melbourne’s Immigration Museum and discussed in a related journal article about the exhibition and its creators (Duggan et al., 2011). While the exhibition featured many nationalities, those objects representing Italian immigrants were chosen from belongings donated to the Italian Historical Society in Carlton and the Museum of Victoria. Selected objects have transcribed stories attached to them, but the majority have only short descriptions and, as such, have required interpretation by the exhibition’s curators and other parties. Visitors to the exhibition therefore faced immigrant objects reconceptualised in the vignettes that accompany them — vignettes constructed to elicit various interpretations and represent several stories through one object. Furthermore, according to those involved in the exhibition, these vignettes were written based on the “imaginative and sensory responses, on the series of memories, images and emotions they generated for each of us” (Duggan et al., 2011:319–320), thereby making them equally the interpretation of the associated photographic artist, creative writer, and curators.

Another initiative that aims to capture the Australian experience of post-Second World War migrants is *Belongings: Post WW2 Migration Memories and Journeys*, an online exhibition established by the Migration Heritage Centre New South Wales (2005). Part of a larger umbrella website concerned with a variety of aspects of migration to New South Wales, this ongoing project tells the stories of post-war migrants through their personal mementoes, photographs and memories. Exhibition content is based upon oral histories and self-submissions, prompted by a list of questions potential contributors are asked to consider and respond to. This initiative recognises the importance of the belongings of this immigrant cohort, and how important objects are in telling the stories of people’s lives. It also acknowledges how the meanings of these belongings are often lost when people die and objects are dispersed, emphasising the need, as the

post-war migrant cohort ages, to preserve both the objects and their meanings before it is too late. The online exhibition is highly accessible: stories can be viewed in multiple categories (cultural background, place of departure, arrival date, migrant accommodation, belonging, project partner, participant's name). The items provide good examples of how, through an object, a life history can be recreated and documented. Nevertheless, although the exhibition has prompted positive reviews,⁶ there remains the potential for issues arising from the "civic role" of the founding body, the Migration Heritage Centre New South Wales, and the inevitable editing of oral histories and interviews for inclusion on the web in the fulfilment of accessibility and education.

On the international stage, the importance of migrant objects is evident in the permanent and temporary exhibitions of perhaps the most famous of all migration museums, New York's Ellis Island Museum. One good example of the Italian experience of America as the proverbial "golden door" is the 2000–2001 *Life line – Filo della vita* exhibition and accompanying book (Amore, 2006). In the introduction to the book, Amore captures the sense of the importance of the past to these migrants and consequently to their descendants when she says, "There is always a sense of history in being Italian. A moment is never only that moment. It stretches back in time to other related happenings [...] like a forged chain binding one to the past [...] always the sense of people looking back more than forward" (Amore, 2006:x). This sense of past is told through talismanic objects, such as the hand embroidered *biancheria* (linen which formed part of a dowry), the religious relics, and the everyday kitchen utensils (Amore, 2006:23), which stretch back, in time and place, as well as forward into the future, so that they function as transitional objects and become a metaphor for the immigration experience. The physical expression of remembering through objects was also given a metaphysical context by linking the objects of migration with red yarn representing blood lines, the thread of life, or a life line. The yarn also represented links to the story of the many immigrants who brought balls of yarn on board, leaving one end with loved ones on land. As the ship left the dock, the yarn unwound, ended, and was caught in the air (Amore, 2006:xix).

The importance of migrant movable cultural heritage is further recognised in the new museum of migration at the Palais de la Porte Dorée in Paris. This new collection also makes use of objects "consisting mainly of personal belongings, mementoes and souvenirs of all sorts that may be transported in trunks and suitcases" (Naguib, 2009:6). Through the use of migrants' belongings, this new museum is able to begin to evoke the experiences of migration.

Migrants' belongings in scholarly literature

On the small list of relevant literature on migrants' belongings is Bertram's valuable work on nineteenth-century Icelandic immigrants to Canada. Bertram (2010:41)

⁶ See for example Wilton (2009).

acknowledges the potential loss of cultural awareness and understanding through the neglect of movable cultural heritage. The importance of the *koffort*, or trunk packed by Icelandic migrants, had been virtually lost as a consequence of their mass disposal by subsequent generations without the vested emotional attachment or knowledge of their significance, until their rediscovery in the 1960s. These *kofforts* generally represented the only piece of luggage the migrants brought with them and, once in Canada, they were kept and used for storage and seating, as well as functioning as reminders of home. Within them the migrants packed homemade crockery and family heirlooms including jewellery and textiles. They often carried the traditional Icelandic spinning wheels and costumes which would later be used in celebrations of Icelandic identity. The migrant trunks almost always included books, especially of Icelandic sagas, plays and poems as mechanisms of keeping language and culture alive in the new land. Although the Canadians regarded the Icelanders as desirable immigrants who were considered “compatible racially”,⁷ in reality their experiences were often traumatic. Their hardships, struggle for identity, and maintenance of culture have been articulated through the study of the *kofforts*, and the objects they contained. Bertram (2010:48) argues that the objects within the trunks of these migrants “provide an oral narrative framework and point of contact between the past and the present” for this migrant group from long ago. Studies of more recent migrations indicate that objects carried by refugees and migrants remain important representations of the migration experience, just as they have been throughout history. Parkin (1994) in “Mementoes as Transitional Objects in Human Displacement”, for instance, draws on the work of Primo Levi and Elizabeth Colson to compare older twentieth-century displacements to those of more recent African ones. Parkin (1994:303) concludes that, despite the urgency of displacement, like the migrants of the past, the items that African refugees chose were “both for immediate practical use but also in order either to re-establish or re-define personal and collective origins”. Just as twentieth-century Greek and Italian migrants chose objects for identity and remembrance, so, too, do today’s refugees look to personal mementoes to “re-articulate socio-cultural identity if and when suitable conditions of resettlement allow for the retelling of the stories that they contain” (Parkin, 1994:314). Similarly, the chosen mementoes are often photos, letters, personal and family effects such as a bible, but they also include items of wider cultural significance such as cassettes of religious community songs so that even “under the conditions of rapid and sometimes violent flight and dispersal, private mementoes may take the place of interpersonal relations as a depository of sentiment and cultural knowledge” (Parkin, 1994:317). What then does this imply about the significance of objects in more measured migrations?

The belongings chosen as part of more recent, planned migration are the subject of a study of Indian migrants who migrated both internally within India and transnationally to the United States (Mehta et al., 1991). This study is particularly concerned

⁷ Bertram, 2010:40.

with the importance of the objects chosen at the moment of migration and the role that the chosen objects play in the maintenance and formation of identity in the new place. The authors conclude that possessions do play an important role in the reconstruction of immigrant identity but that they also provide a degree of comfort by preventing a total identity alienation that might occur in unfamiliar surroundings where there are no material anchors to the migrants' previous established identity. The household shrines, heirlooms, jewellery, photographs and even Indian music and films these emigrants chose to take, all provide a link to their prior identity. The objects are treasured in the distant land and provide an "important symbolic source of security and cultural identity" (Mehta et al., 1991:407). In fact, the authors describe these objects as resembling a child's "security blanket" that provides comfort when they are separated from their mothers or find themselves in stressful situations (Mehta et al., 1991:407). The importance of the "belonging" abroad is emphasised in the study's comparison with internal migration within India where the need for a sense of "Indianness" is not as acute and therefore the objects of migration are not as significant in identity formation and culture maintenance.

In a similar vein, and perhaps more directly linked to the current project, is Levin and Fincher's work on the houses of Italian immigrants in Melbourne (Levin et al., 2010). This study was conducted using oral interviews with ten post-Second World War migrants. It compared the respondents' memories of their Italian houses with their impressions of their new homes in Melbourne. Despite the smallish sample, and the fact that notably nine of the ten interviewees were of northern Italian origin, and therefore representative of only one type of regional Italian culture, the authors argue that houses and their contents form tangible links within the Italian-Australian social space, links between the new world and the old. While the general focus is on the larger concept of the house, its construction, and the utilisation of the garden and the kitchen, there is reference to the smaller more personal objects carried by the migrants. The authors note the use of memorabilia in the houses as providing tangible links with the past. The most obvious of these were family photos, photos and paintings of their homes and villages in Italy, Italian landscapes, and decorative plates. Levin and Fincher conclude that the value of these "souvenirs" lies in their nostalgic quality:

All these objects are connections to origins and roots, and illuminate links with other places and times [...] The objects make adapting to their new lives a little easier, for they help them to maintain connections with their country of origin while they are living on the other side of their transnational space. (Levin et al., 2010:417)

According to the authors, the participants themselves acknowledged that "these souvenirs provide concrete ties with their past world, and thus preserve their memories and nostalgia, while connecting them, at the same time, with their diasporic network" (Levin et al., 2010:417).

An earlier piece by Joy et al. (1995) offers a comparable yet larger study conducted through interviews with sixty families (including husbands, wives, and extended family

members such as children and grandparents) of Italian heritage, whose first generation members arrived in Canada post-Second World War from the central and southern regions of Italy. This study is based upon the hypothesis that “Italian identity has both an experiential base, conveyed through language and values, as well as a structural base, conveyed through the home and the objects within it” (Joy et al., 1995:145). Like Levin and Fincher, the authors conclude that many of these “chosen” objects of migration are tributes to Italy, represent a great pride in being Italian, and provide a “hub around which participants define themselves” (Joy et al., 1995:156), as well as mechanisms by which individuals can bridge cultures while also being reminded of a “cherished past” (Joy et al., 1995:149). Most importantly, the extension of this study to later generations indicates the ability of the objects of migration to invoke the migrants’ cultural past in their cultural present and in the cultural present of subsequent generations.

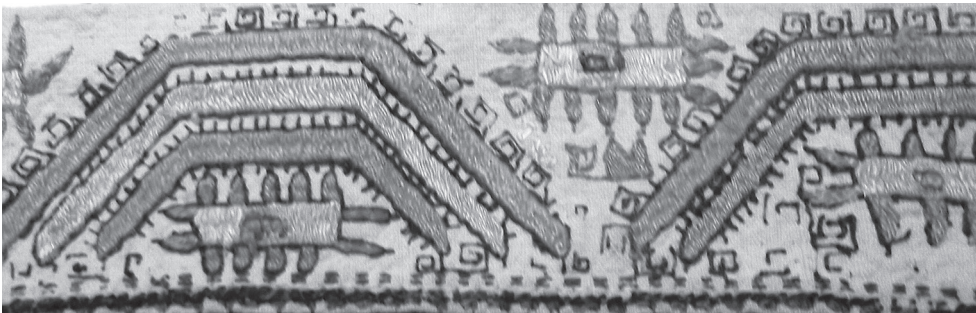
It is evident from the literature considered thus far that there are some important studies involving migration memories through associated material culture or movable cultural heritage. However, as discussed above, while there are a number of studies on migration and on material culture, there is a lack of scholarly convergence of the two. If the one thing all migrants have in common, no matter the time frame and urgency of their migration, is belongings, be they wrapped in cloth or enclosed in suitcases or trunks, and if the “same objects [can] [...] convey an indeterminate variety of meanings and significances, depending on context” (Basu et al., 2008:317), then surely there is a need for all disciplines to work towards a thorough understanding of these migrant belongings within their own areas of expertise as well as in an interdisciplinary context. Just as Corbin (2000), in her archaeological thesis on the luggage of steamboat passengers, expanded the historical record through reinforcement and dissolution of established hypotheses, and the study by ethnographer and folklorist Papanikolas (2002:54) exposed the importance of the amulet in the limited belongings of early Greek migrants, it is timely for historians and traditional scholars of migration to embrace the field of material culture.

The Migrants’ Belongings project

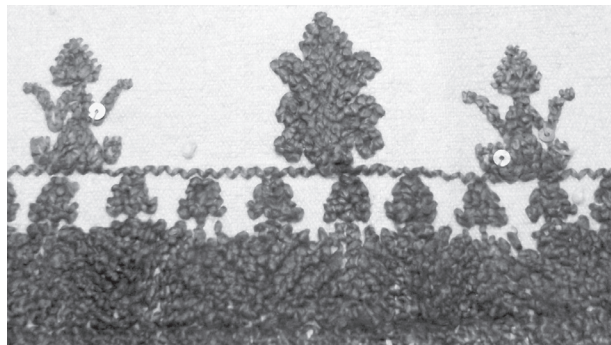
Olsen (2010) argues that “things” have been largely ignored by the broader Social Sciences and Humanities, and that therefore, archaeology, ethnology and museum studies have been almost alone in their concern for the study of objects. This is certainly supported by the literature analysed here. The aim of the *Migrants’ Belongings* project, then, is to consider the belongings of post-Second World War Italian and Greek migrants to South Australia, consulting the relevant literature of museology, cultural studies and other disciplines, but ultimately approaching these objects with the methods of the historian and migration studies scholar to provide a richer understanding of the role and meanings of belongings. The research team supporting the *Migrants’ Belongings* project has expertise in historical analysis, cultural policy, heritage management, migration studies, oral history and museology.

Preliminary research indicates that the variety of objects considered important to individual migrants will be large in number. If previous studies are indicative, it is expected that the memorials of family and home in the form of photos and personal mementoes will be considerable. Similarly, there are likely to be many objects of everyday life such as tools of trade and kitchenware, and those of custom, culture and tradition such as dowries and musical instruments. These are tangible objects of movable cultural heritage and each has stories to tell.

The *Migrants' Belongings* project may also increase our knowledge about “ephemeral” objects, such as foodstuffs (truly organic links with the old country and objects of immediate comfort in the new one) that were also brought by migrants and which have now disappeared. For Italian and Greek emigrants, food was an important symbol of home and of culture. Consequently, Italian immigrants to Canada packed “pots, pans, sheets, salami, cheese, figs, [and] prosciutto” (Gabori, 1993:69) into their trunks and quickly learnt how to defeat the customs officers by marking their trunks themselves with the white chalk crosses that indicated an already examined and passed trunk. Australian customs officials were not so easily fooled, it seems, and Day reports on stereotypes that were quickly established as ships arrived from Europe. Customs officials worked on the principle that “if the migrant was German, look out for firearms and if Italian, look for flick knives from young men and foodstuffs such as sausage from the luggage of married women” (Day, 1996:295). Vessels carrying southern Europeans were targeted and this stereotyping was often vindicated as shown by the example of the Italian passengers on the *Surriento* (1956) who were found to



Details from family heirloom
embroideries brought to
Australia by female immigrants



be carrying “a cardboard box full of sand and a population of snails, a tin of olive oil with tiny bottles of liqueur essence for illegal distillation, and sixteen pounds of salami secreted in one man’s pockets and wrapped in socks within his baggage” (Day, 1996:311). Contemporary newspaper reports support this emphasis on food items such as “green cheeses (...) [y]ou can smell (...) before ever you open the cases” (*The Argus*, 1949:6), and phials of essences such as cherry brandy, kummel, crème de menthe and maraschino to make liqueur (*Cairns Post*, 1948:1). Although these objects are no longer tangible, but rather exist within the memories of participants, the knowledge of their implied importance may be used to add to the existing literature on the objects chosen through interview questions.

The role of women as the custodians of culture, while recognised in some works, is not well represented within the study of immigrant belongings. Within this project, consideration of the role of dowries will offer insight into an area in which material culture, museology and hearsay currently dominates. Although a small number of studies, such as that of McFadzean (2004) on glory boxes, have looked at this important tradition for European migrants, most of the existing literature in this area focuses on Asian migrants. Morley acknowledges that today, and historically, the burden of *heimat* (identity through community and tradition) often rests with women (Morley, 2001:430), but it is not clear what role female post-war migrants had in the choice of belongings. Did their male partners and relatives see the chosen object in a similar light, or was the significance solely female in its orientation? Do subsequent generations of females see these objects as their original conveyors did, or do they, as Marcoux (2001:74–77) discovered in her study of French migrants in Montreal,⁸ also become objects of such importance that they can enslave or burden successive generations?

The project methodology

The *Migrants’ Belongings* project will explore the meanings ascribed to migrant cultural heritage objects in the contexts of the families who value them, and to similar objects featured in museum displays. It represents a research collaboration between Flinders University and the Migration Museum in South Australia. This association between the two institutions aims to broaden the academic boundaries of the project and provide a forum for community output. It is expected that in addition to the academic production derived from this collaborative research, there will be a public display of its findings, both physically at the Migration Museum and virtually, through an online presence.

⁸ In this particular example, the saucepans, the china and the dolls of one participant’s childhood were objects of remembrance; however, they were also a burden. They represented a particular role: the expectation of being a wife and homemaker — a different role from the one that she had actually lived. In this way, these objects were important to her memory of the past, but were also a burden to her as she felt that she could not remove them from her life and could not leave them behind when she moved even though they did not represent her current circumstances.

From a methodological perspective, this study will collect qualitative data through an interview questionnaire focusing on the objects that a cohort of Greek and Italian migrants brought with them when they migrated to Australia. Interviews with post-war migrants concerning the objects of migration will give insight into issues of identity, memory and maintenance of culture.

The questionnaire will elicit responses relating to the motivations for selecting the particular objects brought to Australia, the types of objects packed in the trunk, the role these objects have played in the participants' lives, both in the country of origin and in Australia, and the future of these objects. More specifically, the questionnaire is structured in five parts in order to capture the *biographic* qualities of migrants' belongings:

- 1) The "Background information" section: to collect personal demographic information about the migrants and the circumstances of migration.
- 2) The "Before migration" section: to elicit data on migrants' recollections of the content of the trunk, on what motivated particular choices of objects as well as the migrants' agency in terms of the selection of objects.
- 3) The "On arrival" section: to collect information on the relevance and value of the objects in the new country.
- 4) The "Now" section: to find out what has happened to the objects originally brought from the countries of origin and to gauge the degree of emotional connection the migrants still have with the objects that have been kept.
- 5) The "Future" section: to gather a sense of what could happen to those objects, and whether their emotional or familial value may be transferred to subsequent generations of owners.

The chief objective of the questionnaire is to produce data that may be interpreted broadly in terms of cultural practices as well as identity formation and transformation. It will also produce data informing the study on gender, regional and ethnic differences between the participants. Furthermore, since the study investigates a time span of about 25 years, from 1950 to the mid-1970s, it will also be possible to investigate changes through time in relation to the contents of the trunk. A pilot study testing the research aims and the methodology of the project and involving a small sample of participants is currently underway, the results of which will be published in a separate article.

Conclusion

The literature indicates a knowledge of the importance of "migrants' belongings" in the migration narrative. Scholars of material culture and museology discuss the role of objects and belongings in regard to identity formation, memory, the maintenance

of culture, and their ability to provide a bridge between the old world and the new. Researchers concerned with migrant identity have recognised the importance that “the practice of producing narratives around objects contributes to the personal work of autobiography”, and how this narrative “renders objects as meaningful participants in the social work of identity-building” (Hurdley, 2006:718). Hoskins (1998:1) takes this further, to determine that narratives around objects are not only autobiographical but also help individuals to “fashion their identities in a particular way constructing a ‘self’ for public consumption”. In addition, a study of the Cauloniese in South Australia (Cosmini-Rose et al., 2008) also considers how multiple narratives woven together can create a collective community narrative. This means that individual stories can highlight the commonality of experiences and therefore begin to create a community identity.

Along with notions of identity, it is evident from the related literature that many of the objects chosen by migrants were selected because of their links to home and to significant others in their homelands. Marcoux (2001:73), for example, recognises that these selected objects do not come alive in the person — rather it is the person who lives within the object, so that “the things that people take with them, those *aide-mémoires* help preserve a certain consistency and continuity (...) Bringing things with oneself, then, is to make the choice of remembering”.

Objects of migration, as Woodward (2009:59) explains, do cultural work. Extending the theories of French Sociologist Emile Durkheim, Woodward states that “to express our ideas and to understand ourselves we need to attach (...) ideas to material things (...) [therefore] there needs to be a fusion between thing and idea (...) [and then] things provide the physical means for assigning and confirming our values and attitudes”. Therefore, when a migrant narrates the story of a specific significant object of migration, that narrative is used to make sense of past and present experiences; it is “reflective, accounting for events that have already taken place”, but also an active “site for articulating an individual’s values and beliefs” (Woodward, 2009:61). The continuation of cultural practice is evident in the choice of objects of cultural expression such as music, literature, national dress and religious icons.

This linking of the past to the present and even to the future is articulated in many of the works on the role of “objects” considered in this review. Hecht for example argues that objects collectively create an

experience that is greater than the sum of its parts. For these are more than mere ‘things’, they are a collection of appropriated materials, invested with meaning and memory, a material testament of who we are, where we have been, and perhaps even where we are heading... They bind our past with our present ... thereby framing and reflecting our sense of self [...] sowing symbolic roots into a vanished world. (Hecht, 2001:123)

This notion that the material possessions migrants bring with them from their “old world” to their “new world” destinations “include objects that have been deliberately selected more for their sentimental than practical value, as expressions of ‘old world

identity' is frequently articulated in the literature. It is evident that migrant objects function as 'icons' of connection with the original 'homeland'" (Lambkin, 2006:22).⁹

What is most obvious from the literature is that the interpretation of these belongings, these pieces of movable heritage, these carriers of cultural values, is highly dependent upon the discipline of the scholar. It is evident that in the past, the objects of migration have primarily been the focus of museology and material culture/cultural studies. The *Migrants' Belongings* project aims to fill a gap this study has identified by examining how objects that are part of the migrant journey, in both a physical and a metaphysical way, convey and encapsulate a sense of identity and belonging connected to specific cultural and familial values, while providing an ongoing sense of cultural and emotional connection. The project aims to take the literature and knowledge of other disciplines and apply to it an historical, migration studies expertise in order to add a richer interpretation. Is a musical instrument (such as the Italian organ or Greek mandolin) a tool of trade, an expression of cultural maintenance, a stereotypical representation of a migrant's origins, a family heirloom, or all of these? And what is its symbolic link to the migrant's sense of cultural identity? What is to be emphasised through our study is that objects are of utmost importance in relation to identity formation, as they "serve as the set and props on the theatrical stage of our lives. They situate an individual's character or personality in a context [...] denote our characters for others [...] remind ourselves of who we are" (Wallendorf et al., 1988:531).

It is our firm hope that the *Migrants' Belongings* project will contribute significantly to a better understanding of the role of objects in migrants' lives.

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⁹ See also M. Barrett, 2011:102–21.

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