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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conversations about Home, Community and Identity

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Despite an increased interest in how societies produce, present and interpret the past, empirical studies of how people make sense of and use the past in their everyday life are less common in public history. This paper explores how people use material culture to make sense of their recent past by (re)constructing personal, family and community histories both in museum exhibitions and through everyday engagements at home. We use two case studies: *The West Indian Front Room – Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes* exhibition at the Geffrye Museum, London, and the homes of six families of Albanian heritage in Athens, Greece. In both cases, objects play a key role in mediating and reflecting identity and meaning-making.

Introduction

Over the past 45 years, there has been an increased interest in how societies produce, present and interpret the past, particularly non-official versions of the past. This interest traces a direct lineage from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the USA and the History Workshop movement of the 1970s and 1980s in the UK (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998, Samuel 1994). A common thread in these movements (often referred to as 'history from below') is that they see history as a social form of knowledge, the work 'of a thousand different hands' (Samuel 1994). Their goal is to create a participatory history culture where the past is seen 'as a source of empowerment and political mobilization' (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998: 4) and where people are active agents in creating and producing histories (Archibald 1999; Ashton and Kean 2009; Winter 1996). These movements gave rise to new types of scholarly publications, university degrees in public history, and conferences looking at – among other issues - history, memory and interpretation. Starting with ordinary people and their experiences, these movements have placed oppressed and disenfranchised groups' experiences and narratives of the past at the centre of their endeavor. The type of historical narratives that have been generated using this approach have produced alternative interpretations of history representing ethnic, local and personal experiences, and have given new meanings to the term 'public history' (Kean et al. 2000). Research carried out in this area has examined the role of memory in order to understand the role the past has in the present (Frisch 1990), and the past as a source of personal, community and national identity (Lowenthal 2006); it has even reconceptualized history and the past as heritage (Smith 2006)

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From the museum perspective, where the interpretation of the past and heritage is an integral aspect of many disciplines (beyond history) as well as many types of collections, these movements have also been very influential. Exhibition teams have become increasingly sensitive to the stories they can generate and how interpretations are constructed and presented, often through representing and/or involving the perspectives of groups that were previously excluded. Yet, the bulk of the public history activity takes place in institutional settings such as museums where history or social history is represented, and seems to focus mainly on the construction and interpretation of the past by established interest groups. Despite calls for taking a more user-centered approach (Bergtrom 2008; Carson 2008) – as opposed to an exclusively institution- or discipline-centered approach – and taking on a 'visitor advocate' role, empirical studies of how people use and make sense of the past (whoever it might be constructed by) are less common. However, a gradual shift is taking place. This is enhanced by the proliferation of similar empirical studies in other disciplines such as public engagement with science, community archaeology, anthropology, and audience research.

In the realm of the domestic, this participatory historical culture has enabled us to turn the focus on everyday items and practices, transforming home settings into active sites of memory work. Borrowing from recent trends in memory studies, treating memory production as a dynamic process swirling around performances and places and of the everyday, these democratizing movements illustrate how mementoes, keepsakes and heirlooms transform home spaces into loci of 'emitting history' (Tolia-Kelly 2010: 86; Atkinson 2007; 2008; Bruno 2003; Pahl 2012; Symonds 2004; Terdiman 2003). This power of objects to bridge boundaries by enacting human-object relations has been well rehearsed in literature such as material culture and memory studies (Kidron 2012; Turnbull 2002; Saunders 2000; Miller 2008; Stewart 1993; Hirsch 2002; Hallam and Hockey 2001). By transferring the self to distant places and times (Bell 1997: 821), objects are vital repositories which bring the past sensually, viscerally and emotively alive for those remembering (Seremetakis 1994: 11).

From a migration perspective, the personal experience of uprooting and rerooting involves the creation of intimate spaces where history, heritage and identity are inscribed in home possessions brought from the old country or acquired since arrival (Miller 2008; Pahl and Pollard 2008). In the home setting of the émigré, in particular, material and/or visual artefacts acquire prominent status as touchstones of cultural and biographical narratives enacting embodied, sensory connections with sites, sounds, environments, textures and landscapes of enfranchisement and belonging (Attan 2006; Boym 1998; Burrell 2006, 2008; Pahl 2004; Savaş 2010). For example, Tolia-Kelly (2004: 686) shows how paintings, photographs, pictures and fabrics in South Asian homes in North West London form part of a sense of heritage central to the sustenance of the self, in that they offer aesthetic, sensual and psycho-sociological inclusion for women as they continuously traverse 'British' landscapes within and outside Britain. From this stand point, 'every home can be considered an affirmation of identity', as domestic artefacts mediate feelings of discordancy and discontinuity in the diasporic realm, by providing safety, familiarity and security as solid points of connection with the life encountered before and during migration (Tolia-Kelly 2006: 153). For Mehta and Belk (1991), these 'transitional' material possessions, brought over from the homeland and treasured as heirlooms by successive generations, constitute tangible references to family history, evolving thus into an important aid to identity in migrants' new homespaces. The psychological significance of these transitional objects

for displaced individuals also explains their increasing appearance in museum displays (Basso Peressut and Pozzi 2012; Kean 2008). Whitehead et al. (2012) have noted that by evoking the emotive, sensory aspect of the migration journey, the display of these transitional objects enables museum audiences to make connections between the 'bigger' history and their personal story. This is done by encapsulating through displays the common themes preoccupying diasporic groups: from the sense of belonging (Probyn 1996; Fortier 2000) to cultural traditions rooted in the homeland (Gardner 1993; 1999; 2002; Gardner and Grillo 2002) and a sense of loss of identity experienced in the new area of settlement (Ahmed et al. 2003; Brah 1996; Chambers 1993; Creet 2011; Haigh 2006; Rapport and Dawson 1998).

Following a similar trajectory to public engagement movements in different disciplines (most notably science), the public history movement is gradually realizing that it needs to shift from telling 'the public' about history – a predominantly public relations exercise – to engaging in dialogue and creating knowledge in collaboration with different communities, where the focus is on more deliberative practices. This is not a mere change of focus; it is a rather significant paradigm shift which makes it hard to implement. Despite some groundbreaking work in the (co-)construction of the past(s), a relatively small number of studies has looked at how people use the past in their everyday life or how they make sense and engage with the past – especially the more recent past – across different contexts. Even less published research has focused on particular communities or interest groups. There is certainly relevant applied research carried out in museums which, for a number of reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper, are never published. Hence, we are faced with two separate but very much related issues: 1) we need to conduct more research into how people use and make sense of the past, using their own frames of reference, and to achieve this we need to conduct more qualitative studies; and 2) existing relevant knowledge needs to be better managed and disseminated. We need to start creating linked islands of knowledge around which we can create impact across different settings, as well as in specific individual settings

This paper attempts to fill this gap by employing both the museum and the home setting to explore how people engage with and make sense of their recent past. Specifically, we use these settings as the social, cultural and physical contexts in which individuals and groups engage with, make sense of and learn from their recent past through material culture. To do that, this paper draws on two studies conducted with 1) African-Caribbean visitors at *The West Indian Front Room – Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes* (WIFR) an exhibition at the Geffrye Museum (http://www.geffrye-museum.org.uk/) in London, UK, and 2) families of Albanian heritage living in Athens, Greece. Through presenting and juxtaposing these two studies we aim to show the value of analysing the thoughts and feelings of individuals triggered by the objects and environments that bring meaning and sense of identity to their lives.

Methodology

WIFR case study

The WIFR – the result of collaboration between the Museum and writer and artist Michael McMillan – was a temporary exhibition that explored the essence of homes created by post-WWII immigrants to London from the Caribbean. The central focus was an installation which represented McMillan's vision and memory of the traditional 'West Indian' front room, drawn from memories of his parents' and relatives' homes in the 1960s and 1970s. Special attention was given to the choices people made in furnishing their front room and the links between objects and personal identity. The main aims were to attract more

African-Caribbean visitors to the museum and to share this community's story with a wider audience.

For our research an overall qualitative methodology was used, employing a mixture of data collection methods that generated both qualitative and some quantitative data: 1) audio recordings of conversation during the visit; 2) field notes based on observations during the visit; 3) group interviews: visitors were interviewed about their experience in the groups they visited at the end of their visit, and 4) self-completed questionnaire probing demographic and other visitor characteristic questions. The research questions posed revolved around the idea of home and the past: 1) why do visitors choose to visit a museum to think about home and the past, 2) what thoughts and feelings does the exhibition evoke about 'home', and 3) how do visitors use the exhibition space, insofar as that affects the way they interpret individual displays as well as the exhibition as a whole?

To answer these questions, we listened to the ideas of 'home' and the past that visitors to WIFR brought with them to the exhibition through their conversations. We use the term 'museum-talk' to refer to a special type of conversational practice taking place in museum exhibitions where people normally spend only a small amount of time. As social and physical settings, museums differ from settings where people spend most of their time (such as at home or at work).

The target audience of this study was dyads or small groups of adult visitors from an African-Caribbean background, since groups are more likely to talk about their experience, especially during their visit. In total, 10 visitor groups visiting WIFR were included in this study. Visitors were approached as they entered the exhibition and were asked to participate in the study. Upon providing verbal consent, they were told that the study involved audio recording of conversations during their visit, and a post-visit interview. They were given the choice to withdraw at any point. Participants' consent was secured to use the data to help the Museum improve their exhibitions, to report to funders and to disseminate the findings to internal and external audiences and publications. This study was commissioned by the Geffrye Museum, and was approved by the Museum's Ethics Committee.

Albanian families case study

The second case study aimed to explore the relationship between identity and history/heritage-making in migration by focusing on the home space. The research questions involved: 1) how do individuals and families (as a group) construct their identities on a personal, social and cultural level in migration, 2) how do these identity formations affect what stories individuals and families choose to tell, and what they consider as their history and heritage (or not), and 3) how do individuals and families make history and heritage, and what mechanisms do they employ to connect with them? To answer these questions the study focused on six families of Albanian heritage in Athens, Greece. Critical ethnography, seeking to discriminate between the powerful and the powerless by uncovering the material conditions of inequality, was adopted as a methodology (Foley and Valenzuela 2005; Madison 2005; Noblit et al. 2004). Methods of data collection included 1) participant observation, 2) ethnographic interviewing in the form of 'collaborative storying' (Bishop 2005, 126), 3) visual ethnography techniques and 4) participatory approaches, namely walking interviews and playing with children. Fieldwork took place in Athens in three stages: between May-July 2010, December 2010-June 2011 and August-September 2012. It involved six intergenerational family groups varying in form: from nuclear to more inclusive forms, where extended family members, such as grandparents and aunts played a crucial role in the children's identity formation. The first two Albanian families were approached by mobilising the researcher's (EV's) existing personal networks in May 2010. A 'snowball'

strategy was then used for recruiting the other families. 'Snowball' research strategies, where one 'subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on' are often used to access so-called 'hidden and hard-to-reach populations' (Atkinson and Flint 2001, 1). Both personal networks and 'snowball' techniques proved useful in establishing contacts with families given the Albanians' 'hard-to-reach', stigmatised status in the Greek society. Participants' ages ranged from 3 to 65+ years of age. Children in all families were born in Greece and enrolled in Greek state schools. Data collection was multi-sited; it primarily took place in participants' home settings and those of their friends and relatives. However, during a substantial part of field visits, we joined family members in a range of daily and leisure activities including grocery shopping, dancing lessons, school celebrations, literature festivals and visits to playgrounds, parks, shopping malls, community centres, museums and theatres. Visits occurred once to twice a week and lasted from two to eight hours each, depending on the families' agenda, working and schooling commitments.

Relationships of trust and rapport built up from visit to visit. In most families it was the researcher's relationship with children and mothers that determined frequency of visiting. Children often asked 'when are you visiting next?' and mothers invited the researcher to take part in family rituals they considered to be relevant for this study, such as children's school festivities. Parents' oral consent was secured at the first or the second meeting with each family. Sustaining consent was facilitated throughout fieldwork by engaging in discussions with participants on the purpose of this project, its aims and objectives. This ongoing dialogue enabled family members to express their views on the research, directing the researcher toward practices and elements that they thought 'were of interest'. To secure participants' official informed consent the guidelines of the UCL Research Ethics Committee were followed (http://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/), from which the study received approval in April 2010. Information sheets and informed consent forms for parents/guardians were produced in English and Greek and then translated into Albanian.

The Geffrye Museum case study

A total of twenty-one visitors (19 women and 2 men) in ten groups were included in this study. There was almost an even spread in the 16–18, 25–34, 45–54 and 55–64 age groups. In ethnic background, all members of the groups were African-Caribbean.

People choose to visit museums for a number of reasons. Specifically in this study, responses were categorized across the following three dimensions: 1) introspection, 2) political/participatory, and 3) social event. The first two categories of motivation were identified in this study for the first time.

Introspection (10 groups)

People who have this motivation are actively seeking types of experiences where they are 'transported' back in time and place. This experiential state is characterized by their need to self-reflect, feel connected to and rediscover their own personal/family/community history, and often results in feeling a sense of (personal and collective) achievement and pride. This category is related to the 'home' theme of the exhibition as well as the Museum's content.

All groups who participated in this study said that their main motivation for visiting was their need to have a very personal, immediate and 'authentic' experience of the 'home' of their childhood. The vast majority of them reported actively seeking this type of experience through their participation in a number of events, activities and organizations that focus on black culture. Four visitor groups made a distinction between the type of experience the WIFR offered as compared to other cultural events and activities: they saw it as more 'tactile', more immediate, more personal, more 'authentic'. For them it offered the type of experience that can

transport you back 'home' with all its colours, smells, sounds, patterns and memories.

Finally, a number of people reported, or alluded to, the fact that for families from the West Indies 'home' has different connotations. It can refer both to their country of origin and to their home in the UK but, above all, and especially for the older generation, 'home' is where family is; 'home' is your community and your community's history. The reasons seemed to be cultural but also to relate to the particular conditions of life for the African-Caribbean Diaspora in the UK of the '60s and '70s: 'Like my parents would meet friends and entertain and because they weren't really allowed to socialize in clubs and places like that...Not even allowed, but they wouldn't do that. Their generation wouldn't dream of like Friday night probably going out to [pause] Through meeting in the front room they formed a West Indian social club in Balham' (G7, 391–396).

Political/participatory (7 groups)

This involves actively participating in events and institutions which promote the interests and wellbeing of one's community. Participation is seen as one's duty to one's community; one can participate at different levels and assume different roles, from being an advocate to participating on the periphery of the community. Those visitors who cited a political/participatory motivation for visiting expressed a wish to participate actively in events, activities and the practices of institutions which promote the interests and wellbeing of the African-Caribbean community. In this case, participation is seen as one's duty to one's community and a means of learning about community history. This was thought to be particularly important for the new generation of people of African-Caribbean heritage growing up in the UK. The interest that the WIFR had generated and the email and text messages that were sent around within the community were an expression of this motivation to share with and encourage one's own community to take part.

The political/participation motivation was expressed in different ways: as a need to support an exhibition that focuses on the culture of the African-Caribbean community and, at the same time, 'to show the world who we are'; visiting a museum exhibition challenges preconceptions/assumptions about participation by members of the African-Caribbean community; and the need to learn about, remember and appreciate their roots (especially the younger generations).

Social event (4 groups)

A category related to political/participatory but separate, was 'social event'. Museum visiting is seen as a 'day out' for the whole family, a special social experience with a friend or relative, a chance for individuals to enjoy themselves separately and together. Although members in four of the ten groups had brought friends and family to share the visit, members of all the visitor groups expressed a wish to come back and bring family and friends with them (usually a parent or a child family member).

Themes from the conversations

Five overarching themes were identified, based on the subject matter and purpose of the exhibition: 1) sense of place/community, settlement and immigration; 2) values, beliefs, attitudes expressed by the West Indian front room; 3) social and gender roles; 4) aesthetics; and 5) West Indians in the UK and in the West Indies, ways of living and societal changes. When developing the themes, a major consideration was that all objects or displays in the exhibition could be discussed in the light of any of those themes.

The same themes were used to analyze both tour talk and post-tour conversation. All conversations started with a specific object seen in the exhibition and then drifted off to other ideas or experiences. As seen in **Fig. 1**, the themes dominating the 'tour talk' were firstly values, beliefs, attitudes expressed by the West Indian front room; followed by sense of place/community, settlement and immigration;

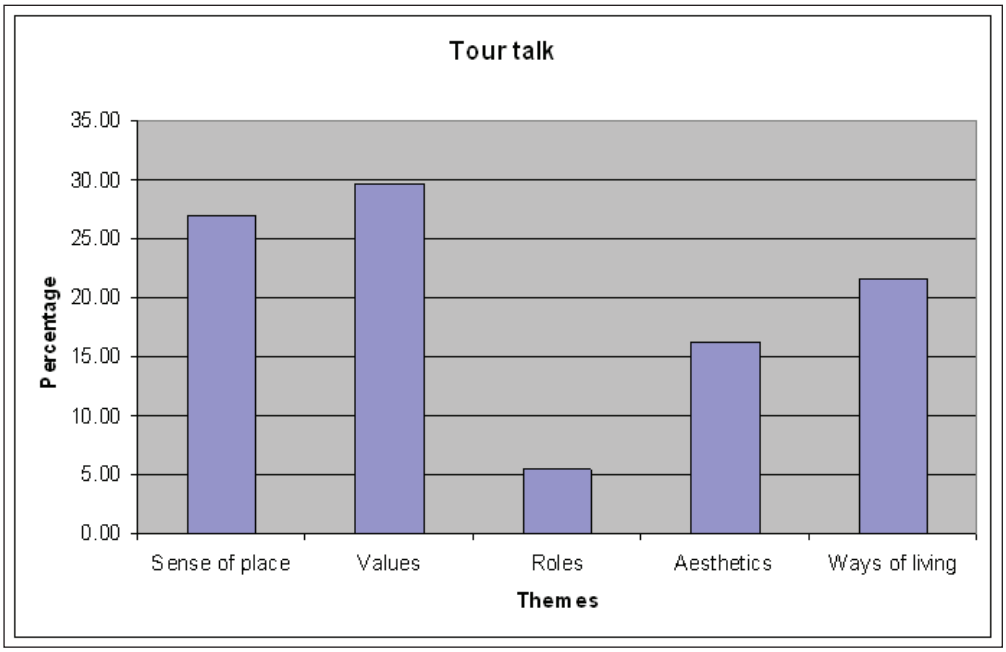

Figure 1: Showing percentage of each conversation referring to each theme.

then West Indians in the UK and in the West Indies, ways of living and societal changes. However, during the post-tour conversation (**Fig. 2**) the dominant themes were West Indians in the UK and in the West Indies, ways of living and societal changes; followed by values, beliefs, attitudes expressed by the West Indian front room; then sense of place/community, settlement and immigration.

The categories that dominated the thematic conversation during the museum visit closely relate to the prior knowledge and experiences that the visitors brought with them, and with the introspective motivation for visiting. Visitors were actively seeking an experience that would connect them with their personal, family and community history and with the values, beliefs and attitudes they were brought up with – their perception of who they are. Interest in this was sustained in the post-tour conversations as it is so closely linked to identity and outlook in life, but it was also embedded in the exhibition interpretation. However, the theme that seemed to overwhelm the post-tour conversations was that of West Indians in the UK and in the West Indies, ways of living and societal changes. This can be explained by the fact that, as reported by participants themselves, they very rarely have the opportunity to engage with their own history on a large scale (i.e. through history lessons or museum exhibitions). This had resulted in an inability to see the overall picture, or find a pattern in the way West Indians lived, both in the UK and in the West Indies, and how societal changes affected their lives and the culture of their community. Visiting the WIFR changed that.

Objects came up often both in tour-talk and in post-tour conversation and related to the themes of sense of place/community, settlement and immigration; values, beliefs, attitudes expressed by the West Indian front room, and aesthetics in particular. Visitors highlighted the importance of particular objects in helping to create a sense of community and belonging. These included the radiogram, the type of music people listen to, and the fireplace. Visitors also felt that having their

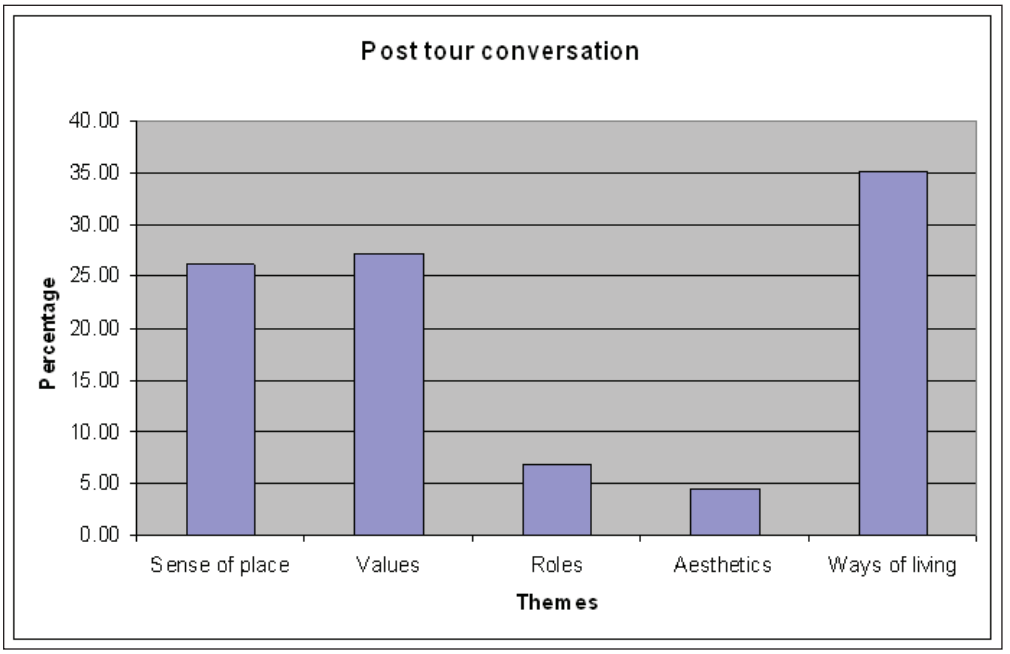

Figure 2: Showing percentage of each post-tour conversation referring to each theme.

history exhibited was important because it made them feel that they do not 'live separate lives'; because it reinforced and authenticated images and experiences they had had in the past through participating in other events such as plays staged in a theatre; because they discovered that there is a black history and that they could be proud of it; because it satisfied a basic human need to know one's own history/culture and to be able to share it with one's children, community and the wider world.

In conversations related to values, beliefs, attitudes expressed by the West Indian front room, visitors explained the deeper reasons why objects displayed in the front rooms were really important in the lives of their owners: they were a symbol of the fact that they 'had made it' ('they can't say that West Indian people came here and sponged'). Within this context quantity really mattered ('you judge it by who can have the most ornaments'). The way the room was constructed and functioned also held meanings: its occupants were trying to recreate an atmosphere of the homes they left in the West Indies with all its (bright) colours, sounds, music, smells, patterns and routines. Music seemed to play a particularly central role; as one visitor put it: 'so I'm talking about self-image, how you see yourself like through music . . .' Finally, objects came up also when visitors talked about the aesthetics of the West Indian front room and the fact that their parents' generation shared the same taste in the type and combination of objects as well as in decoration. For most of them, this realisation seemed to be an outcome of their visit rather than something they already knew. As a result of being able to see a pattern they seemed to be more willing to accept it as part of their history and less likely to find it 'ugly'.

Case study 2: At home with families of Albanian heritage

Mementoes and personal belonging in families' houses captured aspects of individuals' multifarious trajectories, prompting memories of the old home, yet unveiling connections and building bridges with the new one. Transforming families' ordinary domestic interiors into active sites

of memory-work, these 'home possessions' (Miller 2001) acted as visual and tangible stimuli for eliciting past experiences, narratives of migration, personal, family and community histories. In particular, Albanian families used material culture to 1) re-connect with beloved persons 'left behind', 2) ease identity transition by recalling personal, family and community histories, 3) cope with exclusion and stigmatisation, and 4) hand down skills associated with the old home to the younger generation.

Connecting with beloved persons left behind

Visual culture crossing the borders acted as a link between family members and beloved persons left behind. The black and white photo of a father's grandmother sent from his father in Albania awakened memories of blissful moments from early days in his native Pukë. 'She brought my husband up' the mother told us to explain the photo's prominent display in the family's living room. Even though the father did not meet with his grandmother regularly due to geographical distance, for him she represented, in his words 'the strongest emotional bond he ever had with a human being'. Pahl and Rowsell (2010: 49) argue that 'objects can call up deep emotions', while De Nardi (2014: 444) has shown how memory objects can act as 'sites of feeling' by enabling the storyteller to re-live the experience. Indeed, the grandmother's photo stimulated sensory and emotional remembering: during our discussion the father brought to mind the grandmother's unique smell and recalled images of her opening the closet to give him pocket money. This was a deeply moving and generous act according to the father, who mentioned that his grandmother 'had nothing but her little pension' to make ends meet. The grandmother's passing away twenty-six-years ago had transformed these happy childhood instances into disturbing memories, whose recall had become devastating for the father. As he confessed, he did not have the strength to listen to tapes in the family's possession, recording moments between him and his grandmother in Albania a couple of years before her death. It 'was too painful', he told us, revealing that the poignancy of distressing events and moments of deep emotion does not necessarily recede over time.

Easing identity transition from the old to the new home

Material and visual possessions in families' private settings acquire values as 'transitional objects' acting as symbols of personal, family and community identities (Mehta and Belk 1991: 407). Triggering the narration of autobiographical, family and community histories, these treasured objects crossing the borders help participants to nurture 'facilitating environments' (Winnicot 2001 [1971]) easing identity transition from one place to another by providing a sense of security and comfort. In a different family an old children's book narrating the stories of 'a naughty piggy' was amongst a mother's most valued childhood objects in the new residence. 'Cufo's adventures' (*Aventurat e Çufos*), now placed in the children's room, reminded this woman of the 'innocent years in Albania' where she used to watch the cartoon on TV every Saturday. She mentioned repeatedly reading the book during her school years - its pages had by now turned yellowish and its original cover did not exist anymore. By the time we started visiting the family she had created a new cover, where she wrote her older son's name, suggesting that from then on the book belonged to him. While browsing through its pages, she confessed to us that she wished she could afford an Albanian satellite TV, so that her children could watch the cartoon.

A photo of an heirloom, no longer in another's family possession but in a local museum, elicited mother-son, family and community history talk connecting the younger generation with the heritage of the old home. Resonating with Edwards (2012: 228; 2006) emphasizing the plurality of modes of

Figure 3: Nora in her grandmother's lace wedding dress, standing next to her younger brother (1982). (Re- photographed, with permission, by Eleni Vomvyla.)

experience evoked by photographs 'as tactile, sensory things existing in time and space and constituted through and by social relations', this mother, Nora, employed the photo of her grandparents' wedding in Albania to introduce her son to his great-grandmother's sewing skills that she was deeply proud of. She told the boy that his great-grandmother had sewn the lace wedding dress and waistcoat on her own, a practice that was common among women in 1920s and 1930s Albania. As a little child Nora was so fond of the lace gown that she had a picture taken of her wearing the dress and holding a flower bouquet (**Fig. 3**).

The photo was taken on the day her aunt was married. Watching her aunt putting on the grandmother's wedding dress, Nora asked her father to take her picture as 'a bride'. Both pictures acted as visual memorabilia of a greatly treasured object in her life, which was no longer in the family's possession, but in an Albanian museum close to the mother's hometown.

Coping with exclusion

Capturing snapshots of 'a former golden age' (Herbert 2006: 147) photos in families' albums enabled parents to subvert images of otherness and cope with exclusion by communicating children's stories that emphasised symbolic and cultural capital in a pre-migration context. Portraying superior life-styles and idealised homes, these images served as a counter-point against negative stereotypes of backward peasantry, poverty and deprivation, stigmatising parents' social trajectories in Greece. Nora's photo from a family visit to the Zoo in East Berlin brought to life aspects of a prestigious way of living split between Albanian urban centres and East Berlin.

Looking at the photo she recalled cheerful memories of joining her family in the Albanian Embassy in East Berlin, visualising the big parks and the massive children's hospitals stuffed with soft toys (**Fig. 4**). In sharing these stories of a privileged childhood with her son and me, she projected herself as 'a child of the city', whose parents enjoyed well-paid high status professions (her father was a military officer and her mother a bank accountant) and, hence, were able to offer their children exclusive consumer goods, such as omega-3 fish oil. The ongoing travelling to East Germany was further presented by the mother as a 'luxury' restricted to the regime's very few highly trusted employees. The family's son admired his mother's cosmopolitan life often saying to us 'is there anywhere she hasn't been?'. He thought that this was in direct contrast to his upbringing, which was constrained between Greece and Albania.

Handing down skills to the younger generation

Keepsakes and heirlooms carried from Albania acted as touchstones of cultural identity bringing to light learning processes and skills passed down from older to younger generations across multiple settings. A hand-crocheted tablecloth,

Figure 4: Nora with her older brother at the zoo in East Berlin (1978). (Re- photographed, with permission, by Eleni Vomvyla.)

handed down from mothers to children as part of their dowry, revealed themes associated with textile techniques, including crocheting, weaving, stitching, embroidery and sewing. 'Back then there were no such things available in Albania; people had to make these themselves' the mother of another family told us, while showing us her mother's tablecloth, invested with memories of skills and knowledge transmission. The family's grandmother reported that she learned how to crochet and weave from her mother back in Albania. Noticing a big loom, exhibited in the Benaki Museum of Athens during one of our visits with the family, the grandmother told us that 'this [the loom] is where we used to weave carpets with my grandmother'. The mother regretted not being able to weave as well as her mother and grandmother; the latter did it so naturally that she made it look very easy. The family's daughter had learned to sew from her grandmother (on the father's side) in Albania. By the time we started visiting the family's house, we observed the daughter finishing her first embroidery, which was 'not easy to make', and giving it to her grandmother in Athens.

Conclusions and implications

We started this study with a set of questions that aimed to explore how people use material culture to make sense of their recent past by (re)constructing personal, family and community histories both in museum exhibitions and through everyday engagements at home. Our studies show that objects, the visual representation of them through photos, and the memory of them can provide a common ground for eliciting conversations across and between different generations. In this two-way intergenerational storytelling objects also act as signalling systems that generate communication and meaning-making among museum visitors and family members. From a migration and mobility perspective, objects and their tangibility/materiality acquire transitional qualities as they transgress community and national borders opening up ideas of what

it means to be British, Albanian or Greek, for example. In this back-and-forth journey between the old and the new home diverse modes of memory are evoked: bodily, sensory and cognitive.

We have shown that objects suggest a focus on family life, both in the museum and home context. For example, one of the common features of the talk amongst WIFR visitors was that the starting point of conversations and narratives was always an object. According to Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998), museum objects, and other primary sources typically found in museums, give visitors a sense of immediacy which results in high levels of reported trust among their users. Similarly in WIFR, objects were woven into personal stories that related to family and friends, events, objects, places and activities. Some of these stories were very personal and had an almost therapeutic effect on the person who told them, while other stories were more familiar to the other group members – either because these stories involved them as well or because they involved the African-Caribbean community. Some of these stories were told by more than one group member and built on joint experiences/memories. This strengthened family and friendship ties, created richer shared experiences and expanded visitors' repertoire of knowledge about their family and community history.

Similarly within the Albanian family the collection and display of objects carried through the journey from the homeland transformed the home setting into a locus of re-connecting and re-imagining the heritage of the old living place. From black and white photos to children's books and tablecloths, these home possessions invested with sensory, embodied memories, acquired critical significance in creating territories of belonging in the diasporic realm. Concurring with Pahl (2004), Tolia-Kelly (2010) and Savaş (2010), home represented for the older generation an active site of memory work; the ultimate place of reclaiming and reprocessing histories, ideas, values and traditions uprooted in mobility. Images of grandmothers displayed in prominent places in families' domestic interiors acted as links with beloved persons left behind and stimulated personal histories. Treasured mementoes from childhood brought back to life the 'innocent' years of growing up in Albania securing for displaced individuals a 'sense of continuity and familiarity inherent in the notion of home' (Walsh 2006: 130). Integral in this process of re-creating 'domestic space that is familiar, personal and unique' (Walsh 2006: 130) was the communication of autobiographical stories and narratives introducing children to the meanings of the old home. Objects were mediators in these re-constructions of the heritage of the old life, acting as bittersweet tangible reminders of what children would not be able to experience in the hostile and hazardous migration destination.

In both studies objects crossed community and national boundaries allowing the re-working of what it means to be(come) British, Albanian or Greek. As seen in the WIFR case, within a relatively short time, visitors were able to reflect on the content and messages of the exhibition and make links between personal and family experiences, and memories and community history. Specifically, they were able to draw conclusions about the shared values held by the African-Caribbean community and the way its members lived in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, and see everyday objects as having historic importance. In the Albanian family study, photos of 'lost' but fondly remembered heirlooms stimulated family stories acquiring community history notions and dimensions. A grandmother's hand woven lace dress acted as a touchstone for memories of blissful lifecycle events rooted in the old home, while simultaneously introducing the younger member of the family to community practices of Albanian women in the 1920s and the 1930s. This intimate storytelling connecting home and 'away' reconfigured the family's ethos and tradition in the new residence. Through the visual representations of the old home parents

were able to introduce children to values and ways of living that were 'hidden' in the public sphere. Like the first generation of African-Caribbean migrants, whose stories were portrayed in the WIFR, home became a site of refuge for the socially excluded Albanian family. Transitional objects helped marginalised individuals to cope with exclusion and stigmatization in the migration destination. Photos portraying a privileged childhood enabled adults to distort images of negative ethnic essentialisation, criminality and otherness 'haunting' their journeys. This resonates with findings by Herbert (2006) showing how South Asian males emphasized middle-class identity, cultural and symbolic capital to alleviate dismay with aspects of life in Britain and particularly with experiences of racism in the 1970s which hindered opportunities of employment.

Another interesting finding across the two studies was that the same object could trigger diverse modes of memory and be woven into several stories within and across family groups. In the Albanian family a tablecloth brought from the place of origin as part of the mother's dowry stimulated the daughter's journey of cross-cultural learning between the old and the new living place and across different generations. This demonstrates the power of objects to transgress boundaries and to question national borders by encouraging and materialising meaning making across multiple settings. Further research with diverse social groups could shed light on the role played by prior knowledge and experience as well as cultural references in the construction of meanings from objects/collections. In other words, what kind of personal knowledge do objects prompt among different types of people across different contexts and what type of stories do they evoke? This information could be used by museum professionals to develop narratives representing personal and family stories that can become meaningful stories about the history of the community. Such exhibitions can be relevant to and attract different types of audiences.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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