
IN THE WILD / EN TIERRA DE NADIE

LISTENING TO OBJECTS

ESCUCHAR A LOS OBJETOS

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ABSTRACT: This experimental section includes some parts of the performative event "The materiality of transformations: Listening to objects", which closed the 14th SIEF conference held in Santiago de Compostela in 2019. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Regina Bendix, Dorothy Noyes, Sharon Roseman and Francisco Cruces conversed on stage about the cultural meanings of a selection of personal objects. By unveiling the stories contained in *mezuzahs*, hair, a serving platter and a shawl, they put the methodological power of the object/story couplet to the test. The benefits of articulating narrativity with materiality; the silent power of things in everyday life; the embedded character of storytelling, and some of its affective, moral and celebratory virtues were highlighted. The final event can be seen at <<https://vimeo.com/362078953>> from minute 00:52:50 to 01:31:00.

KEYWORDS: Narrative; Materiality; Object; Stories; Everyday life; Intimacy.

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RESUMEN: Esta sección experimental incluye algunas partes del evento performativo “La materialidad de las transformaciones: escuchar a los objetos”, que clausuró el XIV congreso de SIEF celebrado en Santiago de Compostela en 2019. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Regina Bendix, Dorothy Noyes, Sharon Roseman y Francisco Cruces conversaron sobre los significados culturales de una selección de objetos personales. Al desvelar las historias contenidas en *mezuzahs*, cabello, una fuente o un chal, se puso a prueba el poder metodológico del par objeto / historia, los beneficios de articular la narratividad con la materialidad y el silencioso poder de las cosas en la vida cotidiana. Se destacó el carácter incorporado de la narración y algunas de sus virtudes afectivas, morales y celebratorias. Este evento performativo se puede ver en <<https://vimeo.com/362078953>> from minute 00:52:50 to 01:31:00.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Narrativa; Materialidad; Objeto; Relatos; Vida cotidiana; Intimidad.

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OBJECTS IN LIMBO

Regina F. Bendix

MY MOTHER’S HAIR

This is my mother’s hair. I found it when we were dissolving our parental home where, after my father’s

death, my mother had lived alone almost to the end of her life. The hair was in a plastic bag, at the back of piles of her neatly folded undergarments in her closet. I had seen it on occasion before, she had mentioned how she cut off her longish braids around the time when I, her fourth child, was born; a shorter cut, set with curlers by the hairdresser every two weeks, took their place –a hairdo she stuck with until she died some 50 years later.



I took the hair with me, along with some fancy little purses that had belonged to my grandmother and various other things. I did not take along an assortment of baby teeth from the four of us that still were in the bureau drawer in her study where they had been for as long as I can remember. The teeth were a fun remembrance as one grew up, seeing them there in that drawer, reminding one of the phase when they wobbled. They were not pretty, rather a bit weird.

The hair, however, has beauty to it, and yet it is forlorn, in the drawer where I keep it now much as it was when it was stowed away in my mother's closet. One can only guess what my mother may have kept it for. There never was a conversation regarding what she might have wanted to do with it –get it fashioned as a hair piece perhaps, inspired by hairdos common in the late 1950s?

I dislike hair jewelry intensely (Lutz 2015:128-153; Tiedemann 2007). I find it mildly disturbing, because it was part of someone else's body. But not so this hair which was part of my mother's body. It dangles between categories, and yet, like the body itself, it is an object (Kolnberger 2018; Mauss). If I were to pass it on to a hair-piece maker, it would exit from this in between stage, no longer part of a body and not yet an object, and enter the social life phase captured back in 1988 by Appadurai and others. But if one looks into the secondary literature and commentaries, the issue of having wigs made of the hair of the deceased is a bone of contention: there are differentiations being made between hair cut while a person is still alive and taking the hair of a corpse. So much so that some companies advertise that they do not harvest hair from corpses (Bernhardt 2017; Romanowski n.d.). So where does this hair fall, having been cut when the person was alive, but coming potentially into circulation now that she has been dead for so many years?

What category of objects can I place her hair into? She had it cut off when she was in the full bloom of working and mothering, and she hung onto it. To remember how it felt to wear her hair long? How my father, perhaps, liked her with long hair?

Hair is different from teeth, and different again from bones –and, yet, contemplating the hair makes me think about the restitution of bones and how different this hair is as an objectified part of the body from bodily remains kept in collections and museums. It also makes me think about the possibilities of body repair technically possible today. In the present, we

cannot just cut off hair and fashion it into a wig for someone who might have lost hers due to cancer treatment. We can also donate a kidney or part of a liver to repair someone else's body. Ethically, these are far more complicated facets of turning part of our body into an object (Wöhlke 2015). And yet to me these issues are close to how this hair makes me feel: unresolved, not wanting to think about it.

MOVING DAY

The end of the month is moving day and people put stuff out on the street for the city to pick up – or for others, who come before the city's collection truck, to rifle through assembled debris and carry home what appears to be practical, functional or even pleasing. The picture was one of a whole series I took at the end of March 2019 on my way to the office.

The particular assembly depicted was stacked in front of the old age care facility at the bottom of my street and I was struck especially by the two wall hangings. One is a picture of a heart, falling out of its frame, and nestled between the legs of an upside down chair. The other appears like an original painting on a canvass. Perhaps it was produced in one of the art therapy classes one finds in such facilities, with its four panels featuring pastels emphasizing throughout blue, with birds in flight clarifying that it is indeed the sky that is meant to be evoked. This picture is already ripped, perhaps during the night when someone shifted, carelessly or hastily, the sets of drawers and chairs that make up this set of what in German is called *Sperrmüll* –bulky waste. Perhaps the leg of a chair punctured the canvass, perhaps it ripped earlier because someone disliked and punctured it. Both art works are typical of the kind of institutional aesthetic on whose doorstep they now sit –they are somewhat bland, the heart is of the type one can likely buy by the dozen in places like IKEA and find in waiting rooms. Seeing them in front of the care facility, one has to surmise that they hung in the room of someone who passed away, a person who had not brought any art work assembled in their biographical course, and who spent their last years or months awaiting death surrounded by unobtrusive design and low maintenance, robust furnishings.

In the spirit of Agnès Varda who passed away shortly before the 2019 SIEF conference, we can think of *the gleaners*, those who find things of value where



others have decided to consider the harvest over (Varda 2000). The furniture is hardly past its prime. It has to go because a new inhabitant will bring other furnishings, and so the value of this furniture has transformed into waste (Thompson 1979). “Listening” to these objects, is seduced to construct thing-biographies that go along with personal biographies, as Windmüller suggested, though she used the concept “reading within rubbish” (Windmüller 2004, 308). Alas, these things in front of the care home have a distinctly impersonal character. They speak of the necessity to fill empty walls and shape transitory rooms where people wait –for appointments, or, more terminally, for death.

If we listen more closely, they also point to our fields’ tendency to focus on things that have deep biographies or that illustrate particular practices. These bulky items, put out as potential trash, bespeak instead the phenomenal amount of aseptic furnishings late modern societies have created –in accordance also with the medical knowledge of how rooms serving as tempo-

rary homes for the ill and aged are best equipped with furnishings and art work that is easy to clean: Light colors, not too much fabric, but nonetheless some sort of aesthetic appeal that is not associated with a particular religion or ideology. A stylized heart in beige speaks volumes with regard to institutional life.

But during the span of the early morning hours – the duration until pick up is very short in my town – these objects may acquire new owners. I live on a street with a lot of student housing, including international family apartments. The likelihood that some of the night tables and sets of drawers will be put to good use is there. Perhaps they will acquire more character, lose a bit of varnish, have pencil marks on them and rings left by coffee cups.

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THE UNUSED WEDDING PRESENT

Dorothy Noyes

I am the target customer of Marie Kondo, the Japanese wellness guru who teaches you how to liberate yourself from possessions that do not spark joy. Objects make me very anxious, especially if they are objects that belong to me. Unlike most people in most periods of history, my problem is not scarcity but abundance. In the backs of my closets are things I never use but cannot get rid of.

I have just used the first thirty seconds of my allotted eight minutes not to discuss this object in front of you but to talk about myself, and that should tell you something. For suburban Americans who came of age in the 1970s and after, the dominant understanding of made things was arguably not as repositories of memory, not as testimony of the intentions of others, not as tokens of relationship, not as instruments, and not as things in

themselves. Your possessions were objectifications of your possible selves—what you could become by wearing them, reading them, displaying them, and so on. They were, in every sense, aspirational.

This thing in the picture looks the way it looks because it's been sitting unused in an upper kitchen cabinet since 1996, the year my husband and I finally got around to getting married. It was a wedding present from my Aunt Jone and it reflected aspirations that were central to her life but, at that time, seemed irrelevant to mine.

I don't have a genre name for this object, and oddly enough neither does my mother. It's a silver serving dish made by a company called Reed and Barton, which manufactured a lot of the table silver seen in houses on the North Shore of Chicago in those days. If you didn't inherit a particular platter or serving spoon that you needed, Reed and Barton made something of the kind in the relevant period style, and you would find their things in the houseware department of "quality" department stores such as Marshall Field's. This is a particular kind of dish. Maybe you can see



that between the dish and the cover is an inner dish made of Pyrex®, a heatproof glass. So the idea is that you can bake something in the Pyrex® liner, then take it out of the oven and set it into the silver receptacle to take to the table for serving.

This object is still sitting in the original plastic in which it was bought, but the silver has tarnished from contact with the air because on receiving the present I opened it, as etiquette requires. During this period I had a bridal shower and we had a large wedding reception because this was necessary so that all of my mother's friends could return her hospitality to their daughters. I have to say I was not very gracious about this whole unwanted process, and when I saw this dish I said to my mother, "What am I going to use this for?" And my mother looked patient, and for one of many times in our lives expounded what should have been self-evident, "It's for when you give luncheons." A silence followed.

A luncheon is not just having people over for lunch. A luncheon is a genre proper to a generation of upwardly mobile, well-educated women who came of age in the 1950s and as such did not have formal careers. Instead, they married men of similar background and dedicated themselves to supporting their families. But needing additional outlets for their energies, they volunteered, running the garden clubs and the women's boards of cultural institutions and the Junior League and an entire apparatus of nonprofit collaborative and competitive endeavor that paralleled the corporate world occupied by their husbands. This was the more modest layer of WASPdom—the so-called White Anglo-Saxon Protestants—who were the visible US elite of that period, as expounded by the sociologist E. Digby Baltzell (1964).

The luncheon was a key locus of this collaboration and competition among women. It might be held for purely sociable purposes or as adjunct to a meeting or as a fundraiser for some good purpose. Men rarely appeared. The table was formally but festively laid with a pastel-colored tablecloth and fresh flowers and folded napkins and lined silver dishes in which a certain kind of food was served. Small shrimps cooked in sherry and cream. Cauliflower in béchamel sauce gratinéed with cheese. Chicken à la king, with canned pimientos if you were daring. White food for white people, with a sprinkling of paprika and parsley to demonstrate that you were

sufficiently cosmopolitan to be aware of other possibilities. The silver dish that kept things hot was one of the practical devices of the 1950s that combined efficiency and elegance, so that such women could achieve beautiful effects on their own without the servant class that had sustained the prototype of such meals, the English formal dinner.

Well, in 1996 I was on my way to Columbus to become a professor at Ohio State, with my husband following. I have yet to give a luncheon. The pink tablecloth and the silver servers are not the appropriate concomitants to such entertaining as we do. This object's incongruity in my married life could be seen to track a real change in women's lives and in the WASP ethos between my mother's generation and mine. Still, in my older and less dismissive years, I don't want to foreclose this possibility altogether by getting rid of all the silver cluttering the upper cabinets of our kitchen. Who knows what I might take into my head or—more importantly—what the world might demand of me?

Because once you reach a certain age the other potentialities of objects become important; it's no longer all about the self. The thingness of things—as a burden—is foremost in my mind and in my mother's, as in her 80s she looks around a house full of objects that she knows her children will be unable to incorporate into their lives. More interesting are the sedimented intentions that reside in things, and the ironies of time that these reveal. I told my mother I was going to talk about this object here and she burst out in huge excitement: "Everyone got dishes like this as a wedding present, they were so useful, and everyone expected them, I just used one last week at a party, it's a kind with three sections and I served three different pasta sauces and kept them all hot. But the big problem is that you end up breaking the pyrex dish and the new pyrex is made in Japan and when you heat it up too fast it explodes so we're always going around thrift shops to look for old pyrex to replace the liners—" and on she went. Notice when she talks about the dysfunctional new glass she says "made in Japan," which means that thinking about this dish has sent her straight back to the period of her own wedding in 1959, when Japan was the manufacturer of cheap consumer goods. But what especially charms me here is that the old-fashioned silver will look just fine, after a polish, whereas the ultramodern Pyrex® is vulnerable to breakage and obsolescence. If I start

to use this dish I may no longer have this dish. We have here Michael Thompson's distinction between the durable and transient (1979) incorporated into a characteristic late modern hybrid.

Another role of objects, as vehicles for social relationships, is clearer to me now. I've acquired a lot of respect for my mother's world, which seemed easy to dismiss in my younger years. That thick sociability of phone calls and thank-you notes is now serving these women well in their elder years, when mutual assistance is very much needed even amid affluence. A lot of covered hot dishes –of a more practical kind– go back and forth from my mother's kitchen to the homes of friends with cancer or Alzheimer's. Collecting the empty dishes is also a way of checking in and checking up. Moreover, my mother and her friends have mentored younger women and to some extent their world is reproducing itself. A reduced late-WASP elite, it has opened up by both choice and necessity: the politics have moved left and they've taken in some newcomers who have sought them out. There are younger women on the North Shore with careers in abeyance while their children are young; in volunteering they find a way of building a network of women friends and an outlet for civic purpose. And my

mother has been lobbying to get a couple of gay men admitted into the Garden Club of Evanston.

With my own old age and that of my husband becoming visible on the horizon, with larger changes in front of us, I see that I cannot trust entirely to the internalized, intangible values of my upbringing, but that a social world is needed, and that some material props will help to sustain it. Given the mobility of contemporary lives, small portable objects will have to do duty for the social purposes once supported by a stable surround. For the moment this object is rubbish, in Michael Thompson's sense (*ibid.*): I have not paid attention to it for twenty-three years. But it does not just track changes, it maintains alternatives, offering material potentialities and indexing human exemplars that together offer me the opportunity to –someday– assume responsibility for remaking a world beyond the self.

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FROM FOUND CLOTH TO FOUND PRAYERS

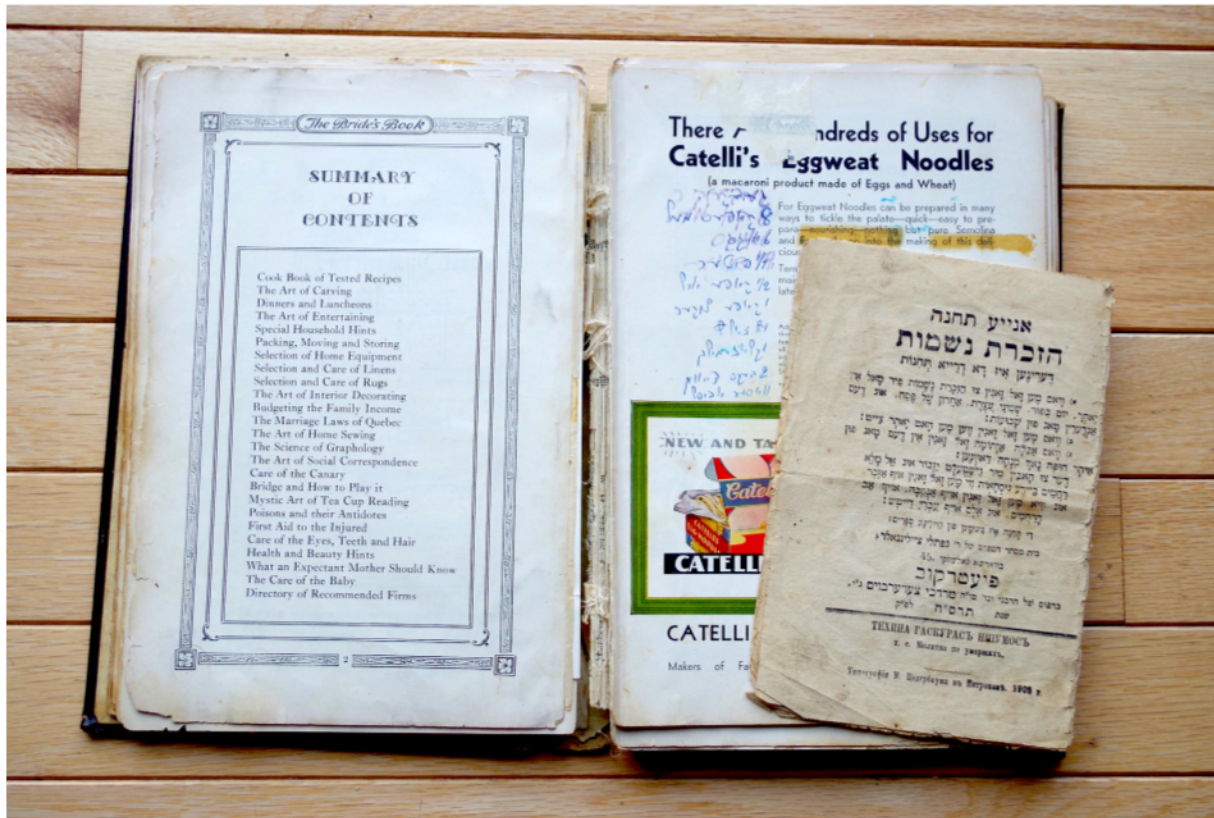
Sharon R. Roseman

INTRODUCTION

Found objects have recurrently served as provocations for my fieldwork practice and as keys to the insights I arrive at, been reflected in my ethnographic representations and analyses, as well as more literally integrated into my textual, photographic, and audiovisual creations. As pieces of culture, they variously synch with, rub against, or enhance other cultural elements: whether these come in the form of material objects, language, or actions. Found objects can elicit stories I did not expect to hear and the tellers did not expect to tell. They sometimes reveal silences. In other cases, they have fed into new activities and relationships. At times, these are objects ‘hidden in plain sight’ and, in other instances, objects that have been tucked away.

This essay focuses on two found ethnographic objects that were tucked away from everyday life for some decades. The first object is portrayed through a proxy, the woven linen shawl (shown on the next page) was made for me in the parish of Santiago de Carreira in Galicia (northwestern Spain) in the late 1990s. The shawl was made by artisans in a weavers’ cooperative associated with the local residents’ association. It stands in for a found object one of the weavers, Delfina Mallón Domínguez, showed me in the early 1990s: a bolt of cloth made in the early to mid-20th century that had been conserved by her husband’s grandmother. I still remember the feel of this *estopa* [rough linen], aligning with stories I had heard from the time when many rural Galicians relied on clothing woven from flax they had planted. I have chosen to focus on the memory of this found object, as represented by the woven shawl, because they both stand in as symbolic bookends for the revitalization of linen cloth production in Carreira.

The second object, shown below, is a *tkhine* booklet printed in 1908 in Warsaw but likely written earlier. *Tkhines* are published “private devotions and paraliturgical prayers” (Weissler 2019:



224) written in Yiddish⁵ by and for both women and men, characterized by their role in encouraging “a personal dialogue with God” (Baumel-Schwartz 2017: 148; also Kay 2004; Ramos-González 2005: 221, 222; Weissler 1991, 1998)⁶. Although they are associated with women’s prayer in the vernacular, *tkhines* were also used by men, particularly those who did not have the opportunity to study Hebrew, Aramaic, and sacred texts (e.g. Weissler 1998: xi, 54-57; Ramos González 2005: 213). I found this set of *tkhines*, entitled *A naye tkhine haskores neshomes* [A new prayerbook of memorial prayers for the souls of dead relatives⁷] tucked inside *The Bride’s Book. A Perpetual Guide for the Montreal Bride* (n.d.)⁸ that had belonged to my maternal grandmother Ida (Edith) Kerdman (née Katz). My aunt Beatrice Endler (née Kerdman) kept them in a box of my grandparents’ belongings after they passed away. To explore the thin, smooth pages of the *tkhine* booklet requires gentleness. It is physically and metaphorically far more fragile than the *The Bride’s Book*, with its frayed binding. As part of an autoethnographic exploration of my Yiddish linguistic and cultural heritages, my initial focus in looking through the *The Bride’s Book* had been



- 5 Yiddish is the vernacular language of Ashkenazi Jews living in many countries in Eastern and Central Europe and elsewhere, numbered at approximately 11 million speakers prior to WWII and gauged by experts to be under 1 million at the beginning of the 21st century (Shandler 2006: locations 73, 2594). Baumel-Schwartz (2017: 149) notes that, while individual prayers were first published as part of other works in the 16th century, separate volumes began to circulate in the 18th century. Although associated with Yiddish, she also notes separate books of prayers directed at women were published in other languages, including Hebrew, Ladino, German and English (Baumel-Schwartz 2017: 149, 151).
- 6 In Orthodox synagogues, females are separated from males into distinct seating areas for prayer.
- 7 “*Haskores-neshomes*” is used in the book’s title, which is a phrase referencing “the custom of praying for the souls of deceased relatives on certain Jew[ish] holidays” (Weinreich 1977 [1968]: 640). The title page notes that the prayers were printed by Neftali Zeilingold.
- 8 The book’s binding has come apart and the first pages are missing. In my research to locate publication information, I have found two citations to this book that indicate it was published by Brandow Publishing. One source (Marrelli 2006) indicates that the copy she consulted was copyrighted 1911/1928. The second source (Nusche 2002) references a 1932 publication date for the same book. I have thus left the date for the copy I have as unknown [n.d.] in the Bibliography.

to read the recipes written by my grandmother in Yiddish –showing influences of English– on scraps of paper, on blank pages titled “My recipes”, or on some of the other pages as is seen with the example visible in the photo.

Perennial sources of inspiration to visual and literary artists, material objects with different characteristics came to play heightened and transformed roles in early 20th century Europe. For example, consider the surrealist André Breton’s reflections on visits to Parisian flea markets which involve “searching for objects that can be found nowhere else, old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse” (Breton 1960[1928]: 52 cited in Mileaf 2010: 85), objects that “become the fodder for Breton’s narratives, as well as for a variety of forms of surrealist object art, including the *objet trouvé*, or found object,” (Mileaf 2010: 85). Since Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque introduced Cubist collages, Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, and André Breton’s found objects and surrealist objects, artists have continued to make art from objects and incorporate objects into assemblages (Mileaf 2010). Indeed, a century later, the terms “recycling” and “upcycling” are frequently

used in relation to the incorporation of found objects into a wide range of creative works, from sculptures to furniture to clothing (e.g. Brown 2013). Similarly, found images, words, and phrases are integrated into found poetry and “found photographs” (Prendergast 2012; Steer 2017).

The idea of found objects has also been extended to a range of other contexts. Camic, Brooker and Neal (2011: 157), for example, note how the incorporation of “found objects” into psychotherapeutic contexts can bring benefits that include the evocation of memories. The patients in their study were encouraged to locate objects from the side of the road or other locations that, through their incorporation into talk therapy, were transformed from “static bits of detritus” into “purposeful and valued objects within a lived life” (Camic, Brooker, and Neal 2011: 158). The anthropologist Adam Reed (2006: 158) employs the term “found fieldwork object” to refer to bureaucratic documents in a particular cultural context. He notes the potential significance of such documents as “artifact[s] of modern knowledge practice” whose importance to ordinary people as well as to bureaucrats can sometimes be missed due to their status as familiar, “ordinary object[s]” that are “in some ways too obvious and mundane”.

Both the bolt of Galician cloth and the *tkhines* were, and would be today for many, vernacular objects in Margaret Lantis’ sense of vernacular culture as “culture-as-it-is-lived [...] [appropriate to] well-defined places and situations” (Lantis 1960: 203). So too would the shawl made by the weavers in Carreira in the 1990s. However, these three objects can also be seen as postvernacular in relation to Jeffrey Shandler’s conceptualization. He notes that, for a minoritized language such as Yiddish, a “postvernacular mode” is when “its secondary, meta-level of meaning is privileged over its significance as a language of Jewish daily life” (Shandler 2006: location 496). He emphasizes that this postvernacular mode sits alongside the continuing vernacular use of Yiddish by various populations⁹, despite a sharp decline since the Holocaust (Shandler 2006: location 77). Therefore, just as “found objects” were thought to be capable of opening new directions for surrealist expression, “post-

vernacularity can be a liberating concept, prompting possibilities of language use other than the vernacular model of full fluency in an indigenous mother tongue” (Shandler 2006: location 358). Shandler’s development of the idea of postvernacularity incorporates a wide range of cultural forms from language use to performances (e.g. theatre) to objects. This essay focuses on two distinct postvernacular contexts in relation to found ethnographic objects strongly associated with women’s everyday lives in past historical contexts.

FOUND CLOTH

What is postvernacular about a length of woven linen cloth in Galicia? I was shown the old bolt of cloth while doing long-term field research for my doctoral dissertation, and specifically because I had been talking to older individuals in the parish about their experiences with planting flax and producing home-spun thread and cloth into the 1940s and 1950s, in the face of poverty. Several months after I was back in Canada writing up my dissertation, I received a letter telling me that I should come back soon to see what was happening, that the community had formed a residents’ association –O Santiaguino de Carreira– and they were ‘doing things’. One of the first of those things was to recuperate linen cloth production¹⁰. On April 25, 1992, the community gathered to plant 4 kilos of flax for the first time in many decades¹¹. Weavers from Carreira continue to produce products for local and non-local markets in a renovated house that belongs to the residents’ association.

In the photograph I have staged the shawl to highlight the high level of the weavers’ craft, to visually record a form of what I have called “*rexurdimento* from a rural base” (Roseman 2008). *Rexurdimento* is a word associated with the late 19th century revindication, defense, reclamation, and revitalization of the Galician language and Galician literature (e.g. Castro 1863; García Turnes 2004; Molina 1989). In my longitudinal study of the activities of the O Santiaguino association, I deployed this word to refer specifically to the kind of rural praxis I observed in Carreira, to how they and individuals in

9 These would include Chassidic communities and secular Yiddishists as well as a mainly older generation of individuals who were raised in Yiddish-speaking families in Central and Eastern Europe or in migrant destinations for Jewish refugees and immigrants.

10 Here are links to a website and a Facebook site with their story and additional images of their work: <https://linosantiaguino.wixsite.com/carreira>; <https://www.facebook.com/Lino.O.Santiaguino/>

11 A moment that was remembered at the association’s 25th anniversary (La Voz de Galicia 2017).

other rural communities have consciously engaged in various forms of reclaiming, conserving, revitalizing, and deploying their vernacular practices and language varieties vis-à-vis frequently urban-dominant projects with similar goals (Roseman 2008; on language, see Roseman 1995, 1997). Many of these processes of *re-urdimento* can also be seen as forms of postvernacularity in Shandler's (2006) sense.

What does the newer shawl in the photograph vis-à-vis the older bolt of cloth tell us? How do these objects intersect with rural Galician workers' accounts of poverty and inequality in the present and the past? Metaphorically, *estopa*, or rough linen flax, was explained to me in diglossic terms, it was the cloth of the poor, the homespun, made through necessity. It was a vernacular object in Margaret Lantis' (1960: 203) sense of "culture-as-it-is-lived", in this case, by necessity. Diglossia is a concept in Linguistics "used to draw attention to the fact that people routinely associate ways of speaking with typical settings, activities, and social personae; and to the fact that these ways of speaking, as well as the settings, activities, and people with which they are associated, are differentially valued (they come in 'higher' and 'lower' versions)." (Jaspers 2017: 185). I am extending it here to practices related to material objects. For the early part of the 20th century, wearing homespun clothing marked rural peasants and workers just as much as their use of local variants of the Galician language. In both cases, this was done in relation to wealthy landowners and urbanites, who spoke Spanish as well as Galician and wore finer clothing made from manufactured, purchased cloth.

The new, fine linen objects such as shawls, scarves, and table linen that have been produced for the past few decades in Carreira and other parts of Galicia can thus be seen as examples of post-vernacular objects. Their continued existence, the processes that go into making them, the way they are packaged, and the meanings they hold in reference to the defense, celebration and display of Galician history and culture are "at least as meaningful...if not more so" (Shandler 2006: 341) than their more universal and obvious functional or aesthetic qualities. The found object of the old bolt of homespun cloth highlights the relationship between old and new objects. And, I would suggest, it can help us think about how such relationships between old and new pieces of material culture stand in for other marginalized and often muted or silenced vernacular practices and relationships from past historical periods.

FOUND PRAYERS

What is postvernacular about a Yiddish-language *tkhines* booklet printed in the early 20th century? This found object might have been brought to Canada by my grandmother Ida (Edith) Kerdman (née Katz) when she left her home in Daugavpils (Dvinsk), Latvia. Indeed, it might have been given to her when she left on her journey to Canada with her brother in her late teens. It is perhaps more possible that it was owned by her mother Leah Devorah Katz (née Catzman) who may have brought the *tkhines* with her when she joined her children in Montreal. My great-grandmother Leah was a great reader and regular attendee at synagogue services. Whatever the exact story is, given that *tkhines* were sometimes given to women when they married, its potential –or at least metaphorical– parallelism with *The Bride's Book* lends it a specific significance in this context. Its significance, for me, in the context of my personal exploration of the Yiddish language and culture and Yiddish language revitalization, can be paralleled with the significance of old Galician texts, Galician language revitalization, and traditions such as Galician craft production of which linen cloth-making is one example. In addition to *tkhines*, Yiddish-speaking Jewish women widely read other categories of religious and secular literature published originally in Yiddish or in Yiddish translations from works in other languages. Moreover, in all languages including English in immigration destinations such as Canada and the United States, and in parallel to much of *The Bride's Book*, there were numerous cookbooks focused on Jewish cuisine and Jewish readers (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2001). Moreover, women were exposed to books such as Moses Henoah Yerushalmi Altshuler's¹² *Brantshpigl* [Burning mirror] (first published in 1596), a Yiddish "book on morality, an ethical guide devoted largely to detailing the duties of wives and mothers" (Ramos-González 2005: 216; Weissler 1998: 52).

The Bride's Book, provided free to brides in the 1930s Montreal of my grandmother, is a thick volume peppered with the ads of its sponsors that include banks and companies selling a range of services and products including insurance, furniture, and ingredients. In addition to recipes and a focus on consuming and taking care of manufactured products in the home, it contains

12 One source notes that the surname was referenced in printed materials of the time as Altshul versus Altshuler (von Rohden 2008: 67).

sets of instructions –for playing bridge, for holding fancy dinner parties, replete with messages about going to church and serving your husband and children. The innards of *The Bride's Book* didn't surprise me, given my general understanding of pressures placed on women to play a major role in processes of cultural mainstreaming in 20th century Canada and United States. I was very moved to read my grandmother's handwriting and then equally excited but also startled to discover the *tkhine* booklet. *Tkhines* have historically had a diglossic relationship with Hebrew *siddurim* [prayerbooks] that represent the formal liturgy used in synagogue services. I had learned a little about *tkhines* in a Yiddish class and in reading about the history of women's literacy in Yiddish. However, having never myself read such prayers before, I was touched by the content of these emotive, personal, often heartrending *tkhines* that also referenced the common hardships and tragedies Jewish women would have frequently experienced in the past in Eastern and Central Europe. An example is the prayer for "an orphaned bride [*a kale yesoyme*]" (A naye tkhine 1908: 14) to say on the day of her wedding. Written in the first-person voice of the presumed bride, she talks about coming to God "with a broken heart, with a lament, and with a plea for God to accept her bitter tears" and pardon her sins (A naye tkhine 1908: 14, 15). In some Jewish traditions, the wedding day is treated like Yom Kippur, a sombre Jewish holy day occurring once yearly when practicing Jews fast and atone for their sins. If she is not worthy enough herself, the orphaned bride asks God to remember the merits of her dead parents and have mercy on her on their account (A naye tkhine 1908: 16)¹³. The bride asks: "What kind of *simkhe* [celebration] can it be for me since my mother and my father are not at my wedding?" (A naye tkhine 1908: 15). She appeals to God to lead her under the *chuppah* [wedding canopy] for her wedding ceremony and to lead her "to good luck, to success, to pleasure,¹⁴ to a long-lived marriage." (A naye tkhine 1908: 15)

While *tkhines* have been part of prayer in the women's section of Orthodox¹⁵ synagogues, and were

13 Warm thanks to Yochanan Lowen for his assistance with this translation.

14 The word *nakhes* is used here, which is often linked to pleasure, enjoyment or satisfaction from one's children.

15 Where a physical partition or *mekhitzah* [in Hebrew] is maintained between females and males, with the women sometimes sitting on an upper balcony and other times on the same floor as the men.

incorporated into some larger prayer books, they are also associated with women's private, devotional prayers in their homes. As Alicia Ramos-García noted, they have been an important component of what Barbara Myerhoff termed "domestic religion" (Myerhoff 1980: 234-5 cited in Ramos-García 2005: 221). As I did research for this essay, I was moved to encounter Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz's article account "My grandmother's *tkhine*." Her maternal grandmother explained how her *tkhine* had "accompanied her" through every part of her adult life, including "the loss of her parents and sister in the Holocaust." (Baumel-Schwartz 2017: 147). She noted to her granddaughter, "Like your parents, I *daven* (pray) from a *sidur*,¹⁶ but the *tkhine* is who I really am." (Baumel-Schwartz 2017: 147).

The found collage of the *tkhines* booklet within *The Bride's Book*, to me, represents a corner of domestic Yiddishlands (Shandler 2006) as well as the broader matter of women's safe-keeping of important personal possessions in the face of losses, displacements, and limited spaces – spaces in which languages and spiritual traditions are interwoven with memories.

CONCLUSION

It was my *bobeh* [grandmother] Ida who would answer my teenage questions about Europe. It was my *zeyde* [grandfather] Chaim, her husband, who would not. The gentlest and most patient man I have ever known, my *zeyde* would tell you about anything. But not about Europe. "Don't talk to her about it," he said to my *bobeh* when she began to answer my questions. As in the phrase *As cousas que non se falan*, which refers to "The things one doesn't talk about" in Galician – the minoritized language I learned in my twenties instead of Yiddish –there are *troyerike zakhn*, "sad things", in Yiddish. When there aren't immediate stories about the past, there are sometimes objects, *alte zakhn*: old things. Old things-to-be-found. The kind of things that André Breton (1960[1928]) sought out in Parisian flea markets. "*Alte zakhn*" – a Yiddish phrase that Shandler (2006: 189) points out is used by non-Yiddish speakers, such as Arab sellers of second-hand goods moving through Israeli streets.

When we encounter them, old objects, their histories, and their links with broader cultural mem-

16 A prayer book used in synagogue.

ories and experiences, can serve as a source of meaning, pleasure, and hope as well as a connection with suffering, grief, and trauma. The fragility, ephemerality, and potential for the retrieval or reclamation of lost objects stands for the fragility, ephemerality, and potential to retrieve and reclaim human cultures and languages. A few years ago, three decades after I had learned Galician in the early 1990s¹⁷, I began to study the Yiddish language, the third most spoken language in Montreal during my Canadian-born parents' childhood (Margolis 2011), a language that they spoke with their own parents. As was common of my generation, and especially those of us raised outside of Montreal or other sites with concentrated Jewish Ashkenazic populations, my siblings and I only heard snippets of Yiddish during our upbringing.

Like the young women from Carreira who began to learn the Galician linen cloth weaving tradition in the 1990s and my own younger self who was then simultaneously becoming a specialist in *Estudos Galegos*, in my fifties I find myself on a journey through *Yiddishkayt* –a journey that has thus far lingered in works of secular poetry and fiction but now also embraces learning more about the *tkhines* recited by my ancestors, written by long-forgotten and sometimes anonymous authors (Kay 2004; Weissler 1998).

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WHY OBJECTS WANT STORIES AND VICE VERSA

Francisco Cruces

To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.
(Mary Oliver, painted on a wall)

MATERIALITY/NARRATIVITY

Is “materiality” anything more than a fashionable word? The concept attracts powerful evocations, with the overtones of a promise: to exorcize the theoretical predicament of “culture”, “society”, “tradition”, “meaning” and other eroded *topoi* within our disciplines.

I do not believe in that promise. It may be true that, at some point during the last decades, we actually lost sight of the materiality of culture. I was trained as an anthropologist during the symbolic turn of the eighties, with its semiotic and post-structural views and its “poetics and politics” of almost everything, let alone the associated interpretive excesses. Could we now be witnessing an anti-idealist reaction? A counterdiscourse flourishes to the proclaimed de-materialization brought on by postfordist, digital and knowledge economies, which invokes the material base of all cultural production and consumption. Some embrace this trend as a political faith in commodification processes as the ultimate explanation against capitalist alienation. True, in order to produce a single minute of Internet connection you need a lot of server farms, plenty of coltan mining, plus a body in front of a screen. However, is this reason enough to return to the abandoned “material culture” recollections of the 19th century?

Paradoxically, this materialist concern goes hand in hand with the triumph of a narratological understanding of our craft. Ethnologists, folklorists and anthropologists see themselves more and more as privileged story-tellers: readers and translators of the tales of others, hunters of good narratives which can

be given a second life in the form of monographs, essays, films, collections and exhibits. Nowadays we are fully conscious of the performativity of discourse, and the deep play of narrative in culture.

While not convinced of the benefits of the new materialist turn in vogue, I acknowledge the paramount importance of the material dimensions implied in having a good story to tell. I have always understood my job as one of interpretation: reading human situations in symbolic terms, looking for the metaphors, plots and schemata through which people express and manage their expectations, deeds and memories. I would not know how to do this any other way. I need stories to tell, and people doing the storytelling.

But before giving legs to a good story, a lot more than just words is needed. Only a philistine reduction of communication to language, and language to words, may have tricked us into overlooking its thick materiality, its heavy dependence on physical presence, its emotional impact, its gross situatedness. Prior to any story, you need to enter a space. To discover, establish and navigate the rules of a viable encounter. To look someone in the eye. To breathe in the ambiances of rooms and corners. To grasp gestures. To assent and dissent. To hunt for markers of belonging, group boundaries, signatures of the self, historical traces in the scene. To feel the patina of old stuff, and the shine of the brand-new.

Like Sherlock Holmes, for you to have a story you have to make your way into it, through indexes, traces and fragments. You have to struggle with matter: with the stubborn, opaque, mute, silent reality of inert things. You have to listen to objects.

ON STAGE

These were my thoughts when my colleague Cristina Sánchez-Carretero kindly invited me to act as host of the closing event of SIEF’s 14th conference¹⁸. Or might I rather say presenter? Master of ceremonies? Discussant? Conferences usually have closing ceremonies and keynote lectures. But this one was, simultaneously, a kind of festival, academic lecturing, protocolary closure and a sort of on-stage focus-group in real-time by five simultaneous speakers.

18 I want to thank the organizers for their trust, and Alex Melczer for editing this manuscript. The session can be seen at <<https://www.siefhome.org/congresses/sief2019/keynotes.shtm>>

Every participant in the panel would choose a couple of personal objects, which would either be physically there or projected on a screen. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett would select each one at random. Then the owner would remark on it for a while, before we would all engage in a free round of comments.

Academics do not enjoy experiments. In general we hold to papers, read out loud. The virtuous among us still resort to a beautiful speech. But cold-bloodedly talking about one's own personal stuff? In a theatre packed with 500 scholars? It sounded like a real challenge. An academic show. An epistemic striptease. A suicidal tightrope walk in the company of four respected colleagues I had never met.

Materiality, stories and museums? Some horror movies have better titles.

Luckily, I met Barbara two days before and shared my worries about how to make this work. She gave me the solution. "I come from curating a museum, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which was built on what once was the Warsaw ghetto. The Nazis had taken great care in erasing the place, they left an ocean of rubble. When you begin from scratch, the only thing you have left is a story. In this museum, the story came first. We had to create the objects from the story we had".

There are stories asking for an object, and objects waiting for their story.

MEZUZAHS, HAIR, SHAWLS AND WEDDING GIFTS

An intimate story is always a gift. This entails serious obligations regarding what can be done with it. You should not get too formalist, nor too political, nor too scientific with anyone's intimate stuff. This is not what personal narratives are for. They are for you to listen, enjoy and learn; not to examine their corpses on a forensic table.

When faced with an intimate story, what you must do is to mirror it from your own memories and experiences. To react to characters, plot and style. To resonate with its implicatures and moral. To point out the finest details, consequences and lessons you imagine. This is what Bakhtin called dialogue: the simultaneous unity of differences in the very act of enunciation (Holquist 1990: 40).

In Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's talk, what struck my imagination was the liveliness and beauty of two

particular objects: the synagogue and the *mezuzah*. Both appeal to the senses. Old Central and East European synagogues, both masonry and wooden, had colorful interiors. The Nazis destroyed the last of the great wooden synagogues. As a result, POLIN Museum had to reconstruct one from documentation: architectural drawings, color studies, paintings, and black and white photographs. While the original building could never be recovered in the sense of the original material, it was possible to recover the knowledge of how to build such synagogues by using traditional tools, materials, and techniques.

A different, though no less interesting, case is the *mezuzah*, a handwritten scroll bearing passages for Deuteronomy. The *mezuzah* is protected inside a case which is affixed to the doorpost at the entrances to a Jewish home and its rooms. Ninety percent of Poland's Jews perished in the Holocaust. That which marked the home as Jewish, the *mezuzah*, was removed. All that remains is an indentation, the trace of a *mezuzah* that was once there. Mi Polin, a Judaica studio in Warsaw, has been searching for these traces and for information about the Jews who once lived in these buildings. Mi Polin takes an impression of the indentation and, once back in Warsaw, makes a mould and a bronze cast, which becomes a case for a *mezuzah*. In the delicate simplicity of these artistically conceived *mezuzahs*, we can feel the convergence of two seemingly opposite trends. On the one hand, they are sensuous, amiable forms. On the other, they incorporate the scars of violence and loss, in the very act of transcending them.

Strictly speaking, these *mezuzahs* and synagogues are neither old nor new. I find Barbara's idea of the creative museum inspiring. Too often we are placed between a critical deconstruction of heritage institutions, on one hand, and a systemic or mainstream blessing of their national and ethnocentric storytelling, on the other (Brumann 2014: 174). The creative museum provides a way out of this impossible dilemma, by reminding us that all memory is actually made of partial remembering, selective silences, inventions and adaptations. The handling of any tradition always implies difficult choices of this kind. The bearers confront the urge to decide what deserves to be passed down to others, and what does not.

Regina Bendix brought hair. Her deceased mother's hair no less. The story, in this case, cannot be but minimal: a dead mother, her hair in a bag, the hesitation over time about what to do with it. An object, Regina explains, living in a limbo.

Contemplating the hair of a deceased person is never an indifferent act. Something pre-reflexive tells you that, although it may look like an object, you know it is not. It is body, living presence, something that was once a person. As the remainder of someone, it becomes liminal: powerful, polluting and sacred. I understand why Regina did not know what to do with it. Liminal things are naturally ambiguous, between person and thing, living and dead. For good reasons, all funerary traditions involve both the careful handling of the corpse and the spiritual maintenance of her or his eternal life. A categorical short-circuit endows this bodily remain with ritual powers. This is why this mother's hair seemed pregnant with raw energy and normative value.

A mother's hair is a time bomb. The image strikes me as a veritable allegory of the contemporary folklorist or ethnologist. A subject rooted in hypermodernity faces the limbo of what remains of the past. Of course, keeping hair recalls universally extended funerary practices surrounding the care of relics, family cults and contact with ancestors. But, at the opposite end of the time axis, this peculiar object also brings to the fore the overextended present in which we are living, which currently devours both past and future. Therefore this hair's limbo is no longer a time-out-of-time, the frozen temporality of Christian Purgatory and ecstatic deserts. It is governed by the accelerated forgetting of late modernity (Connerton 2010). It points at the broken boundaries which modern technologies are now removing between living and dead, human and machine, sapiens and animal, organic and inorganic. As these different limbos thrive and expand around us, we become increasingly uncertain about what to do with the left-overs of our past.

Barbara described her objects in a somewhat epic-lyrical mood. Regina's delivery was more sombre. Dorothy Noyes was dryly ironic. Yes, life is a comedy. And a wedding, a very special and funny chapter. In the movie of our lives, the ceremony of marriage often represents a contrasting moment: on the one hand, the seriousness of the occasion, burdened by conventionality and social control; on the other, the discoveries and hazards of adult life –of which one becomes painfully aware as time passes by. The wedding gift –a serving platter– condenses these ironies.

Dorothy confessed to not having been able to get rid of this platter for years. The plot of the story revolves around a luncheon that never was. Luncheons were an important domestic ritual for middle-class suburban American housewives in the fifties. This sophisticated

cooking/serving dish seems to have been designed to integrate the core values of "elegance" and "practicality." This is precisely why the object became obsolete for a new generation of working professionals. Surprisingly, nowadays these very same sociable dispositions are proving to be quite functional for Dorothy's mother's generation; now that they are older, they reinforce their activities of mutual support and volunteering. Ironies of history. In this way, the luncheon dish sheds light on two different kinds of transitions: those in Dorothy's life and those in the historical condition of modern American women. With their slow pace, objects speak about our relationships and responsibilities beyond the self.

The object brought by Sharon Roseman was also a gift, but of a different kind. It is a delicate souvenir of her years of fieldwork. While Dorothy's tray was comically depicted as a thing of unlikely use, Sharon was wearing her shawl during the session. The thing marks the person literally on the skin.

This gift had a history attached to it, going back to times when the poor people of Galicia had to make their own clothes from linen. The shawl was created in the nineties in a cooperative of weavers. In a process of vernacular revitalization, they were trying to recover old weaving techniques and crafts. This specific shawl was made for Sharon by using an old-style pattern, handed down through generations, taken from a bolt of cloth found in a drawer. In this way, this object connects the new *rexurdimento* with the ancient clothes of the poor.

I think that, around Sharon's neck, the shawl acquires a new layer of meaning. The passage here consists in an implicit farewell. As any other genuine, non-banal souvenir, it builds a bridge between past, present and future. Of course, it brings memories of places, vernacular histories and informants who became friends. But also represents a proof of bonding in permanence, as well as a lasting invitation to return. In this way, the beautiful handicraft declares a series of transformations: in ownership (from Galician family heritage to anthropologist's personal garment), in time (from fieldwork to academic time); and in space (from Galicia to Canada).

Our current lives are made of such Oddysonian pieces. The traveller not only remembers the Island of the Sirens; she wants to return to it.

LESSONS FROM LISTENING

It is not clear why openings and closures should be so important in human encounters. But they are.

Cultures mark beginnings and endings by celebration. And celebrating means mobilizing not just concepts, but bodies, senses, emotions, sound, space, stuff.

First, by bringing the material and the personal to the fore, in this session we became collectively sensitive to the feast of words that an academic farewell wants to be. The formerly feared session became pleasant, and it pleased the audience. Offering serious insights, it also awarded us with a portrait of our speakers. We did celebrate.

Second, the panel suggests a fertile approach to materiality. The many forms of entanglement among things, persons, affects, practices, places, ideas, stories, gestures and time provide clues in order to weave together the practical, material, and discursive facets of everyday life (Löfgren 2014). We need articulation, not contraposition. If you contemplate materiality as something beyond, or opposed to discourse, you will get lost with just a collection of mute things. *Mezuzahs*, platters and shawls are silly objects until someone deploys the clever story contained within them.

Yet, how could narrativity be reduced to a purely representational, cognitive set of devices? These micro-stories are filled with emotion, corporeality and memory. Deprived of this embeddedness, they would sound irrelevant. Daily life stories are often witty and well-shaped; yet they might remain minimal, fragmented and in-becoming. It has to be so. They are porous to the changing participants' circumstances, the demands of the action and the ambiguities of occasion. They are open to completion by others. Nobody owns them fully. Someone's stories become -by circulating- anyone's stories.

Third: telling a story always bears moral and aesthetic consequences. Stories are never just about things. They are about us (Cruces and Moreno 2018). During the event, we could sense this invisible work of the object/story couplet in full action: moving the audience to rejoice, shiver, laugh and reminisce. Exploring various lyric, dramatic and ironic registers. Showing the bouncing of the subject between the "I" and the "Us." Connecting individual biographies with the timeline of significant others, historical past and hurried present. Demonstrating reflective potential through illuminations about life and death, creativity and justice, continuity and change. With an audience predisposed to go along with us, we put the power of little stories to the test.

There are final teachings on bravery, generosity and affect. Our four speakers excelled in grit. And in gener-

osity too, for intimacy can be shared only with the condition of respecting its graciousness. The audience was exquisitely aware of that. They reacted as if something of personal significance was taking place. Could we remain indifferent to the hair of a mother, the gifts from a wedding, the souvenirs from a faraway community?

Lacking a vocabulary of passions, we resort to the objects that contain them. This shortcut works well in real life. Instead of constantly reminding our loved ones how much they mean to us, we rely on the food we share, the sitcoms we watch together, the selfies we exchange. Because the things of the heart are precious and meaningful, they tend to pass unnoticed. It is then that objects have their say.

POSTSCRIPTUM: SHERLOCK IN ZAGREB

My own personal story with SIEF can be recalled through objects. It is a love story.

It began four years ago with a suitcase, a bagpipe and a poem.

Orvan Löfgren's suitcase was opening the conference. A wild Croatian bagpipe would close it.

In between, written on a wall, I found the stunning poem by Mary Oliver (1978) which kicks off this text.

Some of my readers may harbour echoes of the same things.

But this is another story.

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