

## SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Holders of battered memories: Exploring suitcases as museum metaphors for travel, exile, and incarceration

Elizabeth Carnegie<sup>1</sup> | Jerzy Kociatkiewicz<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

<sup>2</sup>Institut Mines-Télécom Business School, Evry Cedex, France

**Correspondence**

Elizabeth Carnegie, Northumbria University, Room 436, City Campus East 1, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST, UK.  
Email: [e.carnegie@btinternet.com](mailto:e.carnegie@btinternet.com)

**Abstract**

In this article we consider suitcases: ubiquitous objects in museum exhibitions used to signify incarceration as well as involuntary or forced migration. Building on fieldwork from museums and public spaces, we consider how suitcases themselves are consigned to the “attic of memory.” As museum displays or as piles of discarded remnants, offered as vestiges, as witnesses to human loss and suffering at death camps such as Auschwitz. We consider suitcases firstly as aspects of the extended self, as described in Russell Belk’s work, and subsequently as symbolic object figuring imprisonment and mobility in museum exhibitions. We present three different such instances: a suitcase full of personal belongings presented to a museum, a set of concrete facsimile suitcases symbolizing forced migration, and a display of suitcases representing individual stories of confinement and migration. Although some of the life stories in the latter exhibition are presented with happy endings, by and large the museum displays featuring suitcases tell of forced movement and forced immobility. This tension animates our analysis, as we explore the double signification of suitcases as markers of mobility, but also of immobility and imprisonment, as well as the intrusive gaze of the state or other voyeur (including the museum visitor). A suitcase is, thus, not just an extension of the self but represents the lost body, for which the museum becomes the final, very public resting place. It becomes and remains an important memory device, even as its very ubiquity threatens to banalize its meaning into a one-dimensional shortcut.

**KEYWORDS**

bodies, incarceration, mobility/immobility, museum, suitcases

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2024 The Author(s). *Curator: The Museum Journal* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

If clothes, then as many as can fit in a suitcase

If books, then those which can be held in memory

If plans, then such as can be forgotten

Stanisław Barańczak<sup>1</sup>

## THE SUITCASE GIRL

On New Year's Eve 1925/1926, the 7-year-old Margaret Hutchison died during an appendectomy in Glasgow, Scotland. There were rumors that the anesthetist was drunk. Her mother in grief put everything associated with Margaret into a small suitcase which we were told she never opened again. When Margaret's mother died, the suitcase, still unopened, passed into the care of Margaret's surviving sister who in turn passed it on to her own daughter on her death. In 1997, some 70 years after Margaret's death, the daughter brought the suitcase into the social history museum in Glasgow to become part of the accessioned collections. The burden of caring for Margaret in what had been a women's narrative of emotional labor for a lost child, passed through generations had come to an end with the next in line being at that point a 17-year-old boy who it was felt could not be expected to care for the suitcase and its hidden and intimate contents in the future.

Margaret's life and death had been frozen in time both contained and invisible yet also never wholly forgotten kept within the suitcase in the "attic of memory." The suitcase itself, ostensibly a tool for traveling, served here to immobilize Margaret: to stop the dispersal of her possessions, the fading of memory, and the inevitable decay. Crucially, because the objects that Margaret owned or represented her were kept together in the suitcase provided to the museum with a snapshot of a working-class childhood, of living and dying in 1920s Glasgow. Inside the suitcase was a framed photograph of Margaret, the dress she was wearing in that photograph, her shoes for Sunday, and clogs for every day. There were school notebooks, toy farm animals, some "handed down" little handbags given to her by family members and a teacup and saucer. In total, there were over 100 small objects including the suitcase itself. All were reminders of a child on the cusp of exploring what it was to be a girl who would become a woman. Formal documents such as birth certificate were included although the death certificate was absent. There was also a shiny new penny given to Margaret by her uncle when he visited her in hospital. Thus, Margaret's new role almost a century later, exists outside the suitcase as a time capsule, a view onto the past, constructed as a history lesson as her personal identity helped to shape general and collective narratives (Assmann, 2010; Dudley, 2009).

Donating family objects to museums offers a comforting alternative to discarding or selling objects related to family members and here of course Margaret's memory and her possessions had merged into one within their suitcase container. Social history museums whose collections reflect the working class and everyday lives of individuals and communities are trusted organizations where value is not placed on financial worth or remarkable histories of celebrated lives (Carnegie, 2006). Museums are trusted in the sense that they care for objects in perpetuity and follow codes of ethics with clear guidelines about the accessioning, respectful care, and display of both human remains and sensitive material (ICOM). Glasgow's social history museum offered a final resting place for Margaret and a solution to the burden of care for her.

However, the accession and change of ownership of the suitcase girl transformed her life from privacy and occlusion within her family context into a public setting, where she became a displayable "ward" of the museum, or even reduced to a set of singular objects when taken from the suitcase. The curator, as the traditionally trusted custodian of assemblages of objects

in their care is a representative of in this case local government which emphasizes that the museum should be a safe place resting for Margaret where she could put away her suitcase. Yet even social history museums are subject to the organizational categories and structures that shape musicological categories. Objects within museums are subject to the logic of collection and organization (Pomian, 1987), and to curatorial judgment rather than to exigencies of experience and preservation of self. Leather goods such as the suitcase itself would be stored with organics, the cup and saucer to ceramics, textiles, photographs, and toys becoming categories of “things.” The shiny penny would be merged into the numismatics collection. Smith (2006: p. 500) described museums as sites constructed to show “the cargo of the past on consignment into the future” and here we argue that the suitcase carries that past into the present-day remembering and memorializing. Margaret's life and her container suitcase might be displayed showing its once secret and hidden contents on the outside. Within the museum, the suitcase is immobilized, and its contents and Margaret's memory remain incarcerated/interred within a final resting place.

This curatorial encounter (one of the authors was the accessioning curator for Margaret) raises several questions about the role of the museum in caring for people, and in representing people and their lives, as opposed to looking after objects in perpetuity (Carnegie, 2006; Edson, 2017). Yet museum objects are implicated in any such endeavors, and their presentation and contextualization shapes the visitors' experience and may impact the experience of others sharing some connection to the objects (as, in this case, that of the carer of Margaret's memory) (Bennett, 2010; Carnegie, 2012). Museum objects are expected to serve the narratives relevant to their presentation, and this, together with the museum values and surrounding narratives change the meaning given to these objects.

In short, where the memory of Margaret was dependent on generational memory it is now being constructed through the constituent objects and museological version of collective memory, then the memory of Margaret is threatened by dispersal within the museum, taken from her suitcase “proxy body,” to museological categories as well as being frozen in the moment of her accession (Olick et al., 2011).

## THE SUITCASE AND THE EXTENDED SELF

The story of Margaret constitutes, for us, a starting point for reflection focusing on one particular object: the suitcase, singled out not just as the holder of possessions from Margaret story, but also as a recurring presence in museum depictions of human life, particularly in context of mobility and immobility, incarceration and freedom, and exile and homecoming. With the suitcase housing the last vestiges of Margaret's life, her story underscores the intimacy of a suitcase as a container for the most intimate aspects of human life. Indeed, in some situations, suitcases can become literal receptacles for human remains, as in the story of Gabonese families recounted by Bernault (2015). Faced with a colonial ban on traditional religious practices and intrusive state surveillance, families wishing to preserve traditional custom of celebrating *byeri*, the mortal remains of revered ancestors needed to find way of hiding relics from the official eyes. Suitcases provided a particularly popular solution:

To counter colonial scrutiny, elders started to put their *byeri* in a suitcase (in French: *valise*) that they could conceal under a bed. Around the 1920s, a euphemism, “*la valise de l'entente*” (“the suitcase of alliance”) emerged among the Gabonese to talk of the newfangled reliquary box where a clan or a family kept ancestral relics.  
(Bernault, 2015: p. 275)

In this article, we focus on more symbolic links between suitcases and bodies: we look at the ways in which the suitcase represents the self or what was once a self within museums and sites of memory or memorialization. We are helped along by the ubiquitous presence of the suitcase in museum contexts: some of the recent exhibitions featuring suitcases in prominent roles include *The Suitcase Exhibit*, Rotherham (Historic Houses, 2021) and the 2023 University of East Anglia student-led art project which uses suitcases to explore loss and the migrant experience “through the eyes of sanctuary seekers from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, Türkiye, and Egypt” (University of Sanctuary, 2023: np). Stylish, old-fashioned “suitcases of memories” are used by Helsinki City Museum in a project aimed at encouraging collective remembering aimed at senior citizens as well as preschool and schoolchildren (Helsinki City Museum, 2023). The suitcases' multiple meanings and contexts, as well as their seeming everpresence, led us to start considering how museums use suitcases as symbolic objects to represent vestiges of or connections to the absent, lost, mobile, or immobilized bodies.

In this, we are drawing on Belk's (1988) notion of how possessions become incorporated into the notion of a self, forming what he calls the extended self, the understanding of which is necessary for a broader understanding of what it is to be human, particularly in a culture oriented toward material objects. Belk builds upon the McCarthy's (1984) rereading of the sociology of George Herbert Mead to view objects as active participants of identity-building, and the most significant objects as the primary holders and stabilizers of identity. Individuals experience a “diminished sense of self” when those possessions are lost or stolen, while retained “possessions help the old achieve a sense of continuity and preparation for death” (Belk, 1988: p. 139). Objects have a commodity phase in the “social life of things” (Appadurai, 1986) where they have exchange value and such objects can continue to have ritual significance after the person has died. Yi-Neumann et al. (2022: p. 7) argue that “things are no longer (just) products of culture, but co-producers of culture and society” and they point out the reciprocal relationship between self and objects: things make people as much as people make things. Objects thus have symbolic value and indeed function as part of the extended self through sympathetic magic. The suitcase has become a metaphor for the act of travel, and as a container for those possessions that best reflect us at the time of packing even at the heightened time of forced mobility. Additionally, suitcases serve as places to store those objects which have no purpose in the present but have sentimental or symbolic value that ensures they are kept for no obvious or immediate purpose. Thus, the self is constructed through and by things and their relationship to our daily lives, ambitions, relationships, journeys, and indeed our deaths. This approach allows for the biographical nature of things, linked to our passage through life. Parkin (1999) describes private mementoes as transitional objects—ones that preserve relationships and social links in times of upheaval. Suitcases, whether or not themselves imbued with significance, serve this purpose with the very promise of their meaningful contents, of evocation of past life and provision of tools for the future one. These arguments serve this article up to a point as they determine that the biographical object largely supports and shapes the narrative of their human owner. Yet objects may survive war, looting, displacement, and forced migration without any relationship to their original owner (Hicks, 2020). When removed from society as in the case of the inmates of Willard State Hospital, New York, the suitcases that contained their “outside world” possessions were stored in the hospital attic in wooden racks with “men's on the left side, women's on the right—alphabetized, labeled, and covered by thick dust and bird droppings” (Stastny & Penney, 2008: p. 986). Dating from the late 19th century, they were rediscovered when the hospital was closing in 1995 and subsequently became the subject of an exhibition. The suitcases' contents can be seen as a catalogue of “aspirations and accomplishments; virtually all suitcase owners had worked—as nurses, nuns, electricians, photographers, teachers, farmers” (ibid.). Once incarcerated, often for life, inmates' outside lives were abruptly interrupted, and associated objects ceased to have any meaning; the suitcases were rarely picked up by families after the inmate died. In this case the suitcases also became a

proxy for the lost body. Their contents offering insights into lost lives. The suitcases thus remained imprisoned even after their owners had died. Many of these suitcases are now in the Albany Museum, United States and thus perpetuate the symbolic incarceration of the former inmates whom they represent.

Suitcases, then, may become museum objects charged with representation of periods, peoples, or places where the relationship with the intimate and personal is lost. If we accept that objects are biographical and part of the extended self, then their survival beyond the death of their original owner renders them vestiges, parts of the whole. As we are concerned within this article with the ways in which objects as vestiges become immobilized/incarcerated within museums, we are arguing that objects—in this case suitcases—become the metaphor for the self, the immobilized body, and is not defined in reference to an absent human body/owner. Within the scope of this text, we largely ignore the also common museum settings in which suitcases are used to stand for leisure travel or the anticipation or pleasure of adventure: our focus is on the recounting of the difficult past, of forced immobility and forced movement, even as we acknowledge that in many (probably most) cases, there is a mixture of will and compulsion, threat and hope, and physical violence and self-determination.

Museums of migration such as that in Buenos Aires, Argentina, or Ellis Island, United States often lack objects to illustrate both individual accounts and narratives of migration. Therefore, they tend to use suitcases as illustrative of movements of people, mobility, and immobility. The suitcases come to a full stop and again remain incarcerated despite the dominant museum narratives stressing liberty rather than incarceration. Suitcases in the context of forced migration and imprisonment are vestiges of life but also remain as by-products of the machinery of war and genocide (Winter, 2012) and what is left behind, their individual human story often lost. We consider the suitcase as a proxy for the lost body.

The suitcase then becomes an extension of us in use or storage, it symbolizes hope and indeed hopelessness of those whose absent bodies are reduced to those possessions that we can pack to take with us, to those often impossible decisions of items we think we might need and yet we can take only what we can carry or take in a hurry or that then will survive us beyond our deaths. Yet as will be discussed that while suitcases convey intangibles of memory, the decay of their often organic form (leather and cardboard), mirrors the process of the experiences of their owners. In this article, we are particularly concerned with understanding how suitcases within museums come to reflect the narratives of involuntary or forced migration, of leaving without returnings and the identity markers that such suitcases carry in terms of labels—both real and symbolic—as documents representing the individual, collective, and body politic within the recent political past.

## REFLECTING ON SUITCASES

This paper grew from multiple engagements with curatorial practice, and particularly from two different experiences. In one, one of us was a curator faced with the story (and vestiges) of Margaret, and forced to balance the conflicting needs of individual or family memory and the representational logic of museum collections. In the other, we were both conducting an ethnographic study of European museums and commemoration sites of recent history (cf. Carnegie & Kociatkiewicz, 2019, 2022) where we have been struck by how the many forms and contexts in which suitcases appeared, ubiquitously providing a ready-made object to stand in for a variety of different, largely painful, experiences of incarceration, and exile. The experience led us to wonder whether these suitcases represent a common symbol to be found in different exhibits or an everyday object repurposed to suit different narratives, experiences, and perspectives. While in our previous accounts of our research, the suitcases, where noted, featured only as asides to the main arguments, this paper is a tentative attempt of mapping the imaginary

connected to the suitcase as a museum exhibit, noting the specificity of the object itself and its cultural anchorings, the commonality of its symbolic placements within exhibitions, but also some of the specific ways in which it has been used to suit particular contexts of incarceration, deportation, and forced mobility. In particular, we wish to reflect on its suitability for understanding and telling painful stories of confinement and exile, and its attachment to the themes of incarceration/freedom and, more broadly, immobility/mobility. It is not an attempt to catalogue all the possible uses and contexts for the presentation of suitcases in museums, nor to provide a representative (in any sense of the word) sample of such displays.

This paper thus sits between a scoping paper and a research-driven response to museums we have encountered during our travels individually and together across our seven country European study, and further afield in United States, Australasia, and South East Asia. It is not a traditionally structured academic text, though its origin lies in traditional academic fieldwork (interviews with and observation of staff and visitors, and textual and visual analysis) that reflects our subject positions. With a looser than usual textual structure, our aim is for the text to mirror our own lines of reflection upon and rethinking of our fieldnotes and of readily available information on various exhibitions and presentation forms, and thus to provide a reader with a space for own consideration and interpretation. In this, we follow the guidelines for writing academic articles differently (Boncori, 2023; Kostera, 2022): not according to a preset formula, but by trying to fit the form to ideas under discussion.

Thus, to provide a basis for reflection, we first recount displays from two key specific museum sites: the Tränenpalast in Berlin, Germany, and the Vabamu Museum of Freedom and Occupations in Tallinn, Estonia. Both of these sites represent the same general region of Central Europe, and both focus on presenting recent history of the surrounding area. Thus, our choice is rooted in our own fieldwork experience, rather than in a general survey of museum exhibits. And thus, both of these sites present multiple personal testimonies and individual narratives within the grander context of the political and historical canvas of the rise and fall of totalitarian regimes. But they differ in the way they embed suitcases in their exhibits, allowing us to explore different ways in which the individuals can be and are represented by generic objects, and in which a mobile container for possessions becomes a mobile container of history, be it implied or recounted. Ultimately, our intention is to use them as entry points for a more general reflection on the significance of suitcases as objects juxtaposing imprisonment and mobility.

## THE CONCRETE SUITCASES (MUSEUM OF OCCUPATIONS IN TALLINN)

The Museum of Occupations in Tallinn (renamed in 2016, and currently operating as Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom) offers a singular and arresting perspective on the suitcase as a symbol of forced mobility. Housed in a purpose-built building near the center of the city, it welcomes visitors with a sculpture “21 suitcases” by Marko Mäetamm and Kaido Ole. The work, adapted from a sculpture group created for Estonian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2003, consists of the eponymous suitcases, made of concrete, standing in a slightly disarrayed group. They seem abandoned, and yet each bears a metal tag labeled with a destination, or perhaps an origin. The presentation of the sculpture group changed somewhat with the 2016 refurbishment of the museum: previously, the group of suitcases extended into a line leading toward the building entrance, and the theme was continued inside, with leather and cloth suitcases mirroring the solid blocks from outdoors. Some destination tags gave the name of John Smith, the everyman, as well as a destination. The theme was even mirrored in the museum gift shop, where some objects for sale were displayed in open suitcases. After the 2016 changes, the concrete suitcases have been

rearranged to form a single group, the theme is no longer extended inside the building, and the label no longer bear any names. Yet the sculpture still stands by the entrance of the museum recounting histories of forced deportation and exile, of imprisonment in Soviet gulags and Nazi concentration camps. As the presentation is barely contextualized (a plaque recounts some of the history of the sculpture, the artwork's name and its authors), the effect is necessarily ambiguous: it provides cues rather than a binding explanation: suitcases can be interpreted as standing in for absent bodies, as waiting for the return of the exile, as representing the moment of departure or as symbolizing loss, never to be reunited with the owner braving the vicissitudes of modern history. Significantly, while the museum contains both multiple individual testimonies from people who have lived through (and suffered in) the regimes afflicting Estonia in the 20th century, and some artifacts evoking these memories, the sculpted suitcases (as well as the real ones in the earlier staging) remain undecipherable: they represent absences rather than presences, untold stories (Izak et al., 2015) which have not and will not be told. Exile is here the end of communication, if not of memory.

We should note that Auschwitz Memorial, located on the site of the extermination camp, also houses its own display of suitcases, though as only one class of many objects seized by Nazis from the prisoners: packed with the hope of providing aid and needed supplies for survival in camp conditions, then confiscated in one of the innumerable acts of Nazi cruelty and dehumanization. Here too, the suitcases stand for absences, and their generally poor state of repair intensifies the hopelessness of the ordeal. Most of these suitcases remain on site since the liberation of the camp, anonymous like the human beings stripped of possessions and identity upon arrival in the death camp. Some are loaned out to Holocaust exhibitions across the world. One suitcase, shown since 2005 at the Shoah Memorial Museum in Paris was recognized by a visitor, Michel Levi-Leleu, as belonging to his father, Pierre Levi, presumed to have perished in Auschwitz. Faced with the prospect of the suitcase's impending return to Poland, Levi-Leleu litigated to block the restitution, claiming that he "didn't want [the suitcase] to repeat the journey that it had already made to Auschwitz" (Kreder, 2008: p. 24). The Auschwitz Memorial initially opposed the request, but ultimately agreed to allow the suitcase to remain in Paris at the Shoah Memorial Museum. In their statement they noted that

the suitcase as one of the rare objects symbolizing and representing the memory of the persons deported to the camp, and which wishes to express the deepest understanding of the emotions of the families of Shoah victims, has decided to leave the suitcase in the Paris Shoah museum on a long-term basis. Mr. Levi-Leleu's family, in turn, has renounced its claims.

(Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2009: np)

The statement goes on to highlight the importance of such suitcases as necessary fragments and reference points for truth telling:

The suitcases belonging to people deported to Auschwitz are among the most priceless material testimony to the tragedy that occurred here. They constitute a small remainder of the property left behind by the victims of the gas chambers, and the names on some of them are among the few proofs of the death of specific individuals in Auschwitz.

(Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2009: np)

Both the Levi-Leleu family and the museum authorities stressed the importance of the suitcase as a symbolic object, a locus of remembrance, and as a symbol, or stand-in, for the person whose body perished in the death camp.

All of the above reinforces our key point, that suitcases cannot be reduced to their often hastily, even desperately packed contents at the point of departure, but represent the body and continue to do so when the body has gone. Their battered conditions, cut or forced open, torn, and diminished by age remind us of lost bodies and their journey. As has been raised above, individual memories and therefore communal remembering is often reduced to this material elements that have survived as prove of human pasts. As such they become vital to our very humanity when the physical evidence of the body has gone.

Damaged objects do not serve as extensions of the self, but stand in for the damaged bodies of their owners, forcing the viewer to face the even more terrifying truth: these suitcases, ragged, and broken, have remained while their owners died, their bodies cremated.

The preservation of objects is, of course, one of the central functions of museums (Alberti, 2005), and the issue of longevity, preservation, and decay of the objects collected and exhibited is a major concern. Suitcases, constructed to weather the often difficult conditions of travel, are sturdy and durable in stark contrast to the necessarily vulnerable and ephemeral human bodies. And yet they too appear fragile in comparison to the concrete suitcases of Tallinn, promising an eternity of remembrance and reflection. Indeed, it is the flimsiness and the poor condition of the objects displayed in Auschwitz that underlines their connection with the vulnerability of the victims of the holocaust (Witcomb, 2009). The very materiality of suitcases conveys embodied experience and intangibility of memory, and the decay of their often-organic form (leather and cardboard) mirrors the embodied experiences of their owners.

## THE LIFE CONTAINED (TRÄNENPALAST IN BERLIN)

Despite the melodramatic name, the Tränenpalast (Palace of Tears) offers a more hopeful, if still harrowing, look at history. It is a museum located in a former border crossing post between East and West Berlin, a place charged with history and with deeply emotional personal stories. Having served for over 30 years (1962–1989) as one of the very few places where the boundary between East and West Germany could be crossed in the westward direction, the building adds considerably to the poignancy of the museum. The latter features a variety of exhibits dedicated to life (particularly in German Democratic Republic) during the Cold War, and the reunification process. The exhibition underlines the psychic and social cost of living in a totalitarian state, noting mass surveillance, an atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion, and the largely impermeable border separating lives in the two German states, which all too often cut across families, friendships, and intimate ties. Arguably, the most arresting among the exhibits is a series of suitcases arranged on a long countertop; some of these are open, others closed. The staging brings to mind a border inspection point, and perhaps the unease of the official intrusion into private life that such inspection can entail. And, indeed, the open suitcases each reveal very intimate life stories of people affected by the Cold War German border. They are dummy objects, of uniform size and form, differing only in their contents. Inside, each contains a selection of personal artifacts, labels summarizing the story of that person and the significance of displayed items to this story, and, quite often, a video recording of an interview. The recordings, showing both the face and the life story of the speaker literally inside suitcase, add to the overwhelming impression of confinement and imprisonment: each life, with its tragedies and its triumphs, encapsulated within a single box. The opened lids can be read as representing the possibility of escape but also as a means for intrusive attention, resonating with the themes of imprisonment and of surveillance.

Each of the recounted stories is, thus, a memory in which life is contained in a suitcase. They are loving memories, but also ones which emphasizes how sparse these lives were, and how strictly



limited both in time and in space. Paradoxically, each suitcase can be read as representing a double and opposed meaning: on the one hand, it is a tool for travel embodying the desire for mobility, and the freedom from incarceration within the dictatorial state. On the other, it is itself a tool of confinement, imprisoning lives and offering them up to the often hostile and voyeuristic scrutiny. We would like to tackle each of these readings and its implications in some detail.

## MOBILITY

The simplest and most obvious interpretation of a suitcase is to see it as a tool facilitating travel. And indeed, many museum collections and exhibitions are content to use them as a simple shorthand for signifying a voyage, possibly a voluntary journey full of adventure—the home of Jules Verne in Amiens (where a suitcase presents a physical counterpart to the extraordinary voyages of the writer's fiction) can serve as a typical example. Most of such exhibits represent the Euroatlantic milieu in which the modern suitcase appeared, as an evolution of the 18th century traveling trunk. It is the ubiquitous, but not universal historical symbol, an emblematic piece of equipment found in leisure travel as well as in the 19th century migrations throughout and from Europe (notably, the mass immigration to the Americas), as well as in the forced displacements of the 20th century (particularly those linked to the totalitarian states of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union). Crooke (2014: pp. 190–191) determines that, “the suitcase has become an international symbol of migration ... The suitcase, sharing basic characteristics with migration across the globe, unities a mutual experience.” She quotes Rogoff (2000: p. 38) that “memories and cultural symbols are objectified, concertized, virtually museumified in a suitcase.”

Henrich (2011) goes as far as to criticize suitcases as objects emblematic of an ethnically skewed, White-centered view of migration still present (or even dominant) across many world museums. We might note here, however, that the two functioning museums specifically focused on suitcases and traveling bags are the Luggage Museum in Haguenau, France, but also the World Bags & Luggage Museum in Tokyo, Japan.

As we noted before, our focus is on the involuntary or desperate traveler—and suitcases are equally commonly present in constructing the representation of the exile, the emigrant, and immigrant. Statues commemorating mass migrations typically depict figures clutching a suitcase, be it the 2006 statue by Neil Hadlock, standing in front of the Migration Museum in Adelaide, Australia or Bruno Catalano's surrealist sculpture series *Les Voyageurs* (displayed, in line with the name, at many different sites). The latter works, depicting figures with large part of their bodies missing, give even more prominence to suitcases as the central element of the statues (though we feel obliged to note that a few of them carry traveling bags other than suitcases). A moving collection of essays and witness testimonies laying bare the experience of refugees from Bosnia and Croatia (Mertus & Tesanovic, 1997) is, tellingly, entitled “The Suitcase.” The authors use the metaphor to designate the book itself and to sketch out the familiar image of the refugee, even as they acknowledge the reality is much more diffuse and does not lend itself to a single generalization:

They travelled on buses, in cars, in UNHCR and other humanitarian aid trucks (with or without paying a fee), on boats, on foot, with or without documents, photographs, suitcases, plastic bags overflowing with belongings.... They left a month's supply of cat food on the floor for their pets, their laundry hanging in the yard, their jewelry buried underneath a wooden fence, their winter preserves carefully stored in the cellar.

(Mertus & Tesanovic, 1997: p. 22)

Suitcases in museums recounting forced travel and exile are liable to be interpreted in line with this tradition: the heaviness of the concrete suitcases can be read to signify the travails of migration, the battered state of others—the misery and suffering. Their compactness points to the paucity of possessions a migrant is able to carry: the shrinking of the extended self, the loss of connection with home and comfortable life. These migrant suitcases remain largely closed, much as the luggage rests largely unopened throughout the voyage. In this way, they point with hope toward the future (and the possibility of unpacking upon reaching some destination), even if this hope might turn out to be false or get snatched away.

This hope is absent from the suitcase-less forced displacements linked with the slave trade: a stark reminder that even the most meager possessions can constitute a privilege. Perhaps more alarmingly, from the contemporary perspective, is the absence of suitcases from recent imagery of migration: not because it has been replaced by another container (such as a backpack), but rather because the exigencies of modern, and often clandestine, migration, do not allow for the luxury of bringing items of emotional value. Instead, it is the smartphone which figures as a necessary attribute of the new migrant—disassociated from other material possessions, and itself an ambiguous tool representing connectivity as well as surveillance (Awad & Tossell, 2021).

## CONFINEMENT AND IMPRISONMENT

Suitcases, as we have noted above, are subject to similar ambiguity: they signify not only the freedom, or necessity of travel, but also immobility and imprisonment, as well as the intrusive gaze of the state or other voyeur (including the museum visitor). Suitcases are not only objects in and of themselves, but also containers: for cherished possession and necessary goods, but also for and of memories. To place an object in a suitcase means to remove it from use and from sight, as everyday life is suspended. The case of Margaret Hutchinson represents a particularly vivid example: her life and the unbearable burden of her death were removed from the social context of her family to be placed in a suitcase, and with it in the perpetual stasis of the museum. The unbearability is important: it evokes Levinas' (1985) notion of the infinite responsibility for the Other, and of how impossible it is to face up to it. For Lévinas, ethical systems offer a promise of taming this responsibility; for Margaret's family, the museums with their rules of safeguarding and display, offered a promise of passing the burden of care to a public institution. In both cases, the relief can be seen as deceptive or illusory.

Open suitcases, showing content normally revealed only in the privacy of one's home, heighten the association between the suitcase and the body of its owner. It is through inspection of the suitcases of the Tränenpalast that the visitors learns the secrets of the personages represented in the museum, often the very same secrets which the Stasi attempted to uncover through its mass program of surveillance. These glimpses can, depending on context and attitude of the observer, be seen as shared intimacy or as violation of privacy. The suitcases do not just display, they also imprison: the once private and very guarded story has now become inescapably public.

In our debates on suitcases as intimate containers and as proxy for the body, we also view museums as large containers of pastness and almost as a proxy for the body politic (Smith, 2006) upon which contemporary readings are made and this changes according to the demands and expectations of museums in the political present. There has been much discussion in recent years about the social role and responsibilities of museums as a “three-dimensional, cultural memory bank” (Janes, 2009: p. 92) which, can serve and reflect societal concerns. Museums, and those supported, endorsed or funded by government, are increasingly trying to make sense of loss and change (Gardner, 2015). Museums however do fix history and they use individual narratives and symbolic objects to frame the past.

Except in exceptional circumstances, and this is rarer in the domestic context, objects once accessioned are now owned by the museums and living donors are subject to accepting the museums conditions of care, with the objects that belonged to the dead now severed from the context of those relationships.

Objects are like comets—clouds of dust with a tale. Most have many; it is impossible to collect a story-less object. The event of an object's being collected interrupts one narrative and initiates another. Without their stories we could not recognize objects at all and would lack words to refer to them.

(Hein, 2007: p. 77)

Yet stories, including those linked to objects, exist only in context; they are told and retold, they rely on the presence (or absence) of other objects, of tellers, of (other, framing) narratives. And museums are sites which inevitably change this context. Margaret, through the accessioning of the objects that reflected her short life is ironically reduced to thing-like status. In that sense we argue she has moved from 'the attic of memory' from within her family context to remain dispersed and incarcerated in perpetuity. We question whether this loss of continuity and subsequent loss of the albeit diluted family memory means she ceases to exist at what point.

The attic of memory is a place for storing that which is impossible to forget and yet too painful to remember and is both a real and private space where the "suitcases" are kept or can be an emotional place at the back of our minds. Museum stores serve a similar purpose but remain in the public arena as an ambivalent quasi-public space. Many of the museums under consideration here inhabit spaces of considerable historical significance that have been transformed into museums, or museumified, overtime—Tränenpalast, Auschwitz Memorial and Ellis Island claim relevance through their siting as much as through their collections. Bennett (2010) in her discussion on Cape Town's District Six Museum argues that while the place may become "museumified" representations are never fixed and always subject to the meeting point of memory and the need to remember for the political present. Existing objects become part of the narratives of place, kept relevant through memory relationships at the Auschwitz Memorial, the suitcases predate the museum, which was build round the physical remains of actual site, but they were nonetheless selected as objects for presentation. Accessioned as museum objects their meaning remains unchanged but their role as memory objects becomes crucial. They represent humanity, yet they are still framed and frozen in the context of the final journey of their owners. Life comes to a full stop, and yet possessions survive and become part of the cycle of understanding within the present day. Suitcases are often all that is left behind when the possession they held are lost or discarded and the body long gone. It is their very survival that renders them memory objects and provides a durable link to the past, to death, suffering, totalitarianisms, victimhood, and culpability; vestigial possessions bearing witness to the horrors of history. This link is literally incarnated in the concrete suitcases of the Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom. Elsewhere, more perishable suitcases remain frozen in time in museum displays; they may be subject to redisplay or removal back to stores, but if they ever leave the confines of the museum it is on loan to other museums and other displays.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we have taken what is a common museological trope: the inclusion of suitcases within museums as a shorthand for representing and framing the movements of people, forced mobilities, and immobilities. We started out agreeing with McCarthy (1984) that possessions, and in this case suitcases that contain other possessions, act as an extension of the self and a

reminder of the self as individual, complex, and accruing overtime. Moreover, as Miller (2008) notes, there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and objects. Yet in the context of museum exhibits, the suitcase, presented in the absence of the self, becomes a substitute as much as an extension: a stand-in for as much as a symbol of the self. In many cases, it represents the lost body, for which the museum becomes the final, very public resting place. The suitcase will, of course, continue to decay regardless of any meticulous conservation practices, but it has the potential to continue to exist long after the death of its original owner: a substitution more powerful than any embalming process. But a suitcase can also continue its symbolic function beyond the association with an individual who once packed it, carried it, or had the case and its contents confiscated: the concrete (cenotaph?) suitcases of the Tallinn museum transcend the individual to represent the everyman refugee or migrant.

We have argued that as individuals we keep a part of ourselves and our personal histories and genealogies in the attic of memory and like in Margaret's story, subsequent generations removed from the context of remembering may find it easier to make the contents public. This we consider a key point. The vestiges, the suitcases, the reminders of the lost bodies, and hope/hopelessness, and realities of the lives they represent make them powerful memory objects in the context of remembering genocide, war, and the political context of the migratory body.

Ultimately, we do not claim that all museum suitcases should be seen as reflections of the lost body: some are props referencing travel, showcases of industrial design, or markers of exhibition categories. Yet, in the context of presenting imprisonment or forced mobility, suitcases appear as amalgams of body and memory, themselves imprisoned within museum collections and exhibition narratives. Such is the critical reading of the way museums still largely depend on objects to frame narratives and suitcases become convenient receptacles for the stories devised by curatorial staff. A kinder interpretations posts to the ubiquity of stories, and to the need for stories even when these can no longer be told in person. Suitcases, then, can be found to contain the collective narratives of shared loss, allowing the museums described in this paper to provide the body of evidence, visual proof needed to reflect key emotional moments/movements of individuals, communities and peoples. Thus, they allow for the creation of conditions for remembering that which is too painful to both remember and forget.

At the same time, the very contradiction in the possible interpretation of a suitcase, which stands for mobility and incarceration, for movement and for the freezing of time, means that the visual narratives framed by suitcases are always open for reinterpretation: Margaret's suitcase can be read as showing passage of stories through generations, the concrete sculptures as signifying, through their weight, the attachment to one's past, and the Tränenpalast suitcases can be viewed as the vestiges of the metamorphoses of the protagonists in the changing contexts of historical shifts. It is thus, by opening up interpretation that the banality of the cliché is avoided, with the open suitcase serving as the open work (Eco, 1989). Similarly, as we draw to the end of the text, we would like to finish not by closing, but by opening it up the text for further discussion and reinterpretation, with a final invitation to contemplate a suitcase. After all, for Crooke (2014: p. 191), an open suitcase “is a means to demonstrate change, new beginnings and a willingness to engage with the viewer, negotiating belonging with the new destination.”

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> From the poem “If china, than only such as” (Jeżeli porcelana, to wyłącznie taka), from Barańczak (2006: p. 218). Authors' own translation.

## REFERENCES

- Alberti, Samuel J.M.M. (2005) Objects and the museum. *Isis*, 96:4, 559–71.
- Appadurai Arjun (ed, 1986) *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Assmann, Aleida (2010) Re-framing memory. Between individual and collective forms of constructing the past. In: Karing Tilmans, Frank van Vree, and Jay Winter (eds) *Performing the past, Memory, history, and identity in modern Europe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 35–50.
- Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (2009) Settlement reached over Auschwitz suitcase. <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/settlement-reached-over-auschwitz-suitcase,568.html>. Accessed 2023.06.28
- Awad, Isabel and Jonathan Tossell (2021) Is the smartphone always a smart choice? Against the utilitarian view of the 'connected migrant.' *Information, Communication & Society*, 24:4, 611–26.
- Barańczak, Stanisław (2006) *Wiersze zebrane*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5.
- Belk, Russell (1988) Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15: 2, 139–58.
- Bernaut, Florence (2015) Suitcases and the poetics of oddities. *History in Africa*, 42:1, 269–77.
- Boncori, Ilaria (2023) *Researching and writing differently*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Bennett, Bonita (2010). "Representing Traumatic Pasts at the District Six Museum." *Sociomuseology IV, Cadernos De Sociomuseologia* 38: 271–281.
- Carnegie, Elizabeth (2012) Curating people? Museum mediated memories and the politics of representation. In: Elisabeth Boesen, Fabienne Lentz, Michael Marque, Denis Scuto, and Renée Wagener (eds) *Grand narratives and peripheral memories*. Luxembourg: [Transcript] Histoire, pp. 143–60.
- Carnegie, Elizabeth (2006) 'It wasn't all bad': Representations of working class cultures within social history museums and their impacts on audiences. *Museum and Society*, 4:2, 69–83.
- Carnegie, Elizabeth and Jerzy Kociatkiewicz (2019) 'Occupying whateverland: Journeys to museums in the Baltic.' *Annals of Tourism Research*, 75:1, 238–47.
- Carnegie, Elizabeth and Jerzy Kociatkiewicz (2022) 'Dances with Despots: Tourists and the afterlife of statues.' *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 30:2-3, 584–99
- Crooke, Elizabeth (2014) The Migrant and the museum: Place and representation in Ireland. In: Laurence Gouriévidis (ed.), *Museums and Migration: History, Memory and Politics*. Oxford: Routledge, pp. 190–201.
- Dudley, Sanda (ed., 2009) *Museum materialities: Objects, engagements, interpretations*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis.
- Eco, Umberto (1989) *The open work*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Edson, Gary (2017) *Museum ethics in practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Hein, Hilde S. (2007) The authority of objects: From regime change to paradigm shift. *Curator*, 50: 1, 77–85.
- Helsinki City Museum (2023) Suitcase of memories. <https://www.helsinginkaupunginmuseo.fi/en/pictures-objects-helsinki/suitcase-of-memories/>, accessed 2023.06.28.
- Henrich, Eureka (2011) Suitcases and stories: Objects of migration in museum exhibitions. *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, 3:4, 71–82.
- Hicks, Dan (2020) *The brutish museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press.
- Historic Houses (2021) "Asian artists repackaged 'The Suitcase' for Wentworth Woodhouse exhibition. <https://www.historichouses.org/news/asian-artists-repackage-the-suitcase-for-wentworth-woodhouse-exhibition>, accessed 2023.06.27
- Izak, Michał, Linda Hitchin, and David Anderson (2015). 'Introduction'. In: Michał Izak, Linda Hitchin and David Anderson (eds) *Untold Stories in Organizations*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–10.
- Janes, Robert R. (2009) Rethinking museum collections in a troubled world. In: Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Trevor Jones (eds) *Active collections*. New York: Routledge, pp. 85–97.
- Gardner, James B. (2015) Preserving/shaping/creating: Museums and public memory in a time of loss. In: Sharon Macdonald and Helen Rees Leahy (eds) *The international handbooks of museum studies, vol. 1: Museum theory*. Hoboken: John Wiley.
- Kostera, Monika (ed., 2022) *How to write differently. A quest for meaningful academic writing*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Kreder, Jennifer Anglim (2008) The Holocaust, museum ethics and legalism. *Southern California Review of Law and Social Justice*, 18:1, 1–43.
- Levinas, Emmanuel (1985) *Ethics and infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- McCarthy, E. Doyle (1984) Toward a sociology of the physical world: George Herbert Mead on Physical Objects. In: Norman K. Denzin (ed.) *Studies in symbolic interaction, volume 5*. Greenwich: Jai Press, pp. 105–21.
- Miller, Daniel (2008) Material culture. In: Tony Bennett and John Frow (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis*. London: SAGE, pp. 271–90.
- Mertus, Julie and Jasmina Tesanovic (1997) Introduction. In: Julie Mertus, Jasmina Tesanovic, Habiba Metikos, and Rada Boric (eds) *The suitcase: Refugee voices from Bosnia and Croatia*. Oakland: University of California Press.

- Olick, Jeffrey K., Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (2011) Introduction. In: Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (eds) *The collective memory reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–62.
- Parkin, David (1999) Mementoes as transitional objects in human displacement. *Journal of Material Culture*, 4:3, 303–20.
- Pomian, Krzysztof (1987) *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris, Venise: XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Rogoff, Irit (2000) *Terra infirma: Geography's visual culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Charles Saumarez (2006) The future of the museum. In: Sharon Macdonald (ed.) *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 543–54.
- Stastny, Peter and Darby Penney (2008) Lost luggage, recovered lives. *American Journal of Public Health*, 98: 6, 986–8.
- University of Sanctuary (2023) <https://www.ueasanctuary.org/the-suitcase/>. Accessed 2023.06.28.
- Witcomb, Andrea (2009) Remembering the dead by affecting the living: the case of a miniature model of Treblinka. In: Sanda Dudley (ed.) *Museum materialities: Objects, engagements, interpretations*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis.
- Winter, Jay (2012) Museums and the representation of war. *Museum and Society*, 10: 3, 150–63.
- Yi-Neumann, Friedemann, Andrea Lauser, Antonie Fuhse, and Peter J. Bräunlein (2022) *Material culture and (forced) migration: Materializing the transient*.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Dr. Elizabeth Carnegie's** work is interdisciplinary drawing on sociology, anthropology, material culture studies, and social history. It is concerned with the representation of peoples and cultures within publically funded or endorsed museums and galleries and festive spaces. I am particularly interested in how such cultural spaces “curate people” by drawing on individuals' life histories and present values to shape collective memory and to make group identity “truth” claims. Current relevant projects include projects that reflect both local and international concerns. These include a study of representations of the recent past within museums in eastern and Central Europe, a Hull-based project “All Haul Together”, an intergenerational study of the role and meaning of tattoos within seafaring communities and a study of Orientalism drawing on Western-generated images of the “other.”

**Dr. Jerzy Kociatkiewicz's** research interests revolve around two interrelated and complementary issues: organizational and consumer experience in everyday settings and narratives (actual or fictional) of organizational and marketing encounters, and most of my ongoing and planned work touches upon one, or both, of these issues. In terms of studying everyday experience, I am drawn toward Pine and Gilmore's notion of experience economy, useful in my research, not so much in explaining the extraordinary (though with Marjana Johansson (2011), I have studied city festivals framed as experience economy events), but as a framework for understanding staged interaction underpinning the seemingly ordinary workday encounters.

**How to cite this article:** Carnegie, Elizabeth and Jerzy Kociatkiewicz. 2024. “Holders of Battered Memories: Exploring Suitcases As Museum Metaphors For Travel, Exile, and Incarceration.” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 67(4): 821–834. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12642>.