Introduction

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Introduction

Special Issue: *The Surviving Thing: Personal Objects in the Aftermath of Violence*

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Mass violence leaves behind a trail of destruction. Similar to people, things also fall victim to displacement and armed conflict. Possessions swap hands, get voluntarily or forcefully relinquished, exchanged for food and shelter, hidden away, entrusted to friends and neighbours for safekeeping, or brought along into forced exile. Objects find their way to mass graves, too, in the pockets and bodily orifices of the killed, on the fingers and wrists of the dead. In times of war, things are also made in response to economic scarcity and deprivation. Produced from waste and debris, such objects come to serve as mementoes, reflecting prison or frontline experiences and attesting to the hardships of the time. In the aftermath of war and conflict, things are often rescued by survivors or the families of victims, inherited, retrieved by forensic experts, or looted from war graves. The surviving thing is mobilized in art practices and storytelling, displayed in museums, or called forth to testify in judicial proceedings. Whether as trophies, souvenir, or evidence, things remain imbued with affect, permeated with memories (both actual and constructed), and burdened with conflicting narratives of the past.¹

This special issue investigates the role of objects in European histories and legacies of war, genocide, and forced migration. Combining expertise in anthropology, forensic archaeology, cultural geography, history, and cultural and memory studies, the articles explore how rescued, looted, misappropriated, abandoned, found, and recovered things live on in the aftermath of mass violence. Based on broad range of cases and geographical contexts, from Spain to France, Italy to Poland, this issue looks at material, symbolic, and political practices around surviving things and traces their trajectories in post-conflict settings. We show that personal objects are endowed with various qualities – sentimental, mnemonic, economic, evidentiary, and aesthetic – as they move between various contexts and are exposed to a host of meanings, ownership claims, and regimes of worth. Foregrounding the trajectories of surviving things against those of objects with different biographical configurations, not imprinted with carnage and suffering, we examine how intimate biographies, political and economic orders, and social structures are reconstituted and rearticulated in the aftermath of

¹ In this introduction, we use the terms object and thing interchangeably. We acknowledge the conceptual distinction, developed within the field of new materialism and post-humanities, between *objects* as passive articulations of subject-object divide and *things* as autonomous, active, and agentive forces (Bennet 2010: 5). Nevertheless, we retain both notions, in order to accommodate the variety of conceptual approaches informing the articles collected in this issue.

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3 violence through interactions with material objects. But we argue, too, that the survival of
4 things is sometimes owed to their complex, enduring materialities, eliciting affective and
5 political responses and opening up spaces of representation pertaining to the past and the
6 present. It is these qualities that make their survival and their *living on* an active and dynamic
7 process.
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12 The contributions to this special edition pose a series of comparative questions about
13 the surviving object in post-conflict societies in twentieth- and twenty-first century Europe: in
14 the aftermath of the First and Second World War, the Spanish Civil War, and the Holocaust.
15 Focusing on how things function in a variety of public, domestic, and ‘embodied’ settings, we
16 address the following questions: How do individuals and communities interact with the
17 surviving object? What personal and collective emotions do those interactions trigger? How
18 and why is the object preserved, collected, stored, reused, and/or left to decay? How is it
19 employed in storytelling, memory making, art practices, and nation building? To what extent
20 can the surviving thing be considered an embodied site of affect, which enables us to record
21 and document the past, on the one hand, and to enact and relive it, on the other? How does
22 *material survival* of things invest them with the power to shape and/or challenge the ways in
23 which the past is experienced, remembered, and narrated?
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34 **Objects in the Aftermath of Violence**

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36 Despite a growing interest in the material culture approach, personal objects have been
37 marginal to the histories of war, genocide, and displacement (Saunders and Cornish 2009).
38 Historians who look at the past through the lens of materiality point to the limitations posed by
39 archival material in researching objects. Indeed, official sources offer little insight into the
40 circulation of private possessions and their role in the lives of individuals and communities.
41 Information provided by ego documents tends to be scarce, fragmentary, and/or incomplete
42 (Auslander and Zahra 2018). This explains why much historical research has focused on state
43 practices, in particular the economic ramifications of genocide, and the role of those practices
44 in political transition, nation building, and the legitimation of power (Dean 2008; Üngör and
45 Polatel 2011). Historians increasingly pay attention to collective emotions and community
46 formation around objects, particularly in the context of forced migration and imprisonment
47 (Gerlach 2017; Benninga 2018; Rachamimov 2018). Some pioneering work places everyday
48 objects at the heart of wider narratives of armed conflict (Schechter 2019). On the whole,
49 however, discussions of personal belongings, their circulation, and their owners’ emotional
50 attachments remain negligible in the wider historiographies of Europe.
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Anthropology, archaeology, cultural geography, and related disciplines have more successfully placed objects, particularly objects of sentimental value, at the centre of their inquiry into conflict, displacement, and genocide. Owing to their focus on individual and societal subjectivities, and their greater reliance on oral histories and personal testimonies, it is these disciplines that have championed the study of conflict and post-conflict materialities. Much of that research sees objects as tangible markers of conflict experience and, by association, as *carriers of memory*. In general, scholars agree that such objects constitute powerful narrative devices. For example, there is a growing body of scholarship on personal belongings (including photographs and other keepsakes) rescued by genocide survivors, which shows how things can activate oral performance and offer a window into a transgenerational and transnational memory of the event (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006; Naguib 2008). Objects “touched by beloved hands” can also provide a tangible connection with the killed. The physical handling of those possessions partially offsets the absence of murdered relatives and supports the articulation of conflict-related trauma (Körte 2004). In a similar vein, studies focusing on mementoes preserved by war veterans and their families (be it an old letter, a commemorative scrapbook, or the bloodstained shirt of a fallen partisan) demonstrate how such artefacts can activate “embodied storytelling”: those things simultaneously trigger memories, provide the teller with coping mechanisms, and constitute a haptic anchoring in the present (De Nardi 2014).

Scholarly literature also shows that the circulation of personal objects is not restricted to the domestic setting. Such belongings fall prey to state policies of confiscation and allocation, participating in the affective regimes of ownership that emerge in the aftermath of political violence. Colonial crimes, the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the Holocaust, the expulsion of Germans from much of East and Central Europe after World War II, the Palestinian Nakba of 1948, and the mass displacement of Greek and Turkish Cypriots following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, among other events, have provided fertile ground for research on the emotional and embodied aspects of plunder, repossession, and “treasure hunting”. In all those contexts, anthropologists argue, personal items such as jewellery, clothing, and furniture become loci of both desire and discomfort, simultaneously valued for their economic worth and perceived to be haunted by the previous owners. In justifying and condemning misappropriation, responses to repossessed property yield new *symbolic, moral, and tangible economies* in which other people’s belongings structure communities and forge individual and collective identities (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Stein 2015; Von Bieberstein 2017; Dziuban 2016).

Discussions of the *evidentiary value* of objects are particularly pronounced in conflict archaeology and analytical approaches centred on forensic investigations in the context of mass political violence: along with human remains, objects are also sought, exhumed, and scrutinized (Saunders 2012; Gonzales-Ruibal 2018). Material culture allows for a documentation of crimes, including those that have been subject to covering over and erasure (Dziuban 2017). The recovered material traces of the past are reconfigured into evidence and used to support (or challenge) claims for accountability and justice. Additionally, personal effects recovered from the sites of political violence, especially in the absence of a body, become potent embodiments of feeling, loci of emotional investment, of mourning, and of memory (Renshaw 2011; Baby and Nerard 2017). And yet, traveling between individuals, archaeologists, forensic experts, and state actors, the exhumed things are subjected to symbolic and political repurposing. Often, at the end of their journey, they become subject to musealisation (and appropriation) as collectivized icons of violence and suffering (Van der Laarse 2017; Dudley 2018).

Inevitably, personal objects that survive conflict invite artistic and commemorative refashioning. They are removed from the private to the public realm, and from the strictly personal meanings of a familiar group of users to collective values promoted by elites such as writers, artists, museum curators, and memory activists. Often anonymous and veiled in mystery, such objects excite the imagination and inspire storytelling. It is through this reworking and recycling of the personal object that its *aesthetic* qualities come to light. In the process, the thing becomes enmeshed in memory politics, both facilitating and challenging the governing narratives of the past and processes of nation building (Stańczyk 2016; Young 2018).

The Survival of Things

Despite the many meanings they manifest, there has been little research on what it means for things to survive. In this special issue we foreground this question. Examining the intimate trajectories and *afterlives* of objects, we inquire into the modes and meanings of survival: How and when do things survive? Does survival imply, in this context, merely that objects *live through* realities of violence and even *outlive* their original owners? Does the survival of things speak to the endurance of the material form in the face of shifts in symbolic, affective, economic, and political meaning making? Does an object have to remain unchanged, or even present, to survive or to *live on* as materially and affectively resonant, as an unruly subject of

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memory and imagination, of tender attentiveness or rough politicization? Does the materiality of things itself convey and advance specific forms and ways of thinking about survival?

In this issue, we show that the survival of things is neither static nor straightforward. We distance ourselves from approaches that distinguish between “survival in life”, reserved for humans, and “survival as relic”, attributed to objects. This distinction, introduced by Didi-Huberman (Didi-Huberman 2008, 45), suggests that things remain potent but *lifeless* testimonies to violence. In contrast, we are interested in the social lives and complex biographies of things (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). As they enter and travel through new post-conflict regimes of ownership and worth, objects become ontologically and epistemologically unsettled. Their meanings change, and they assume new identities. In our approach, therefore, surviving extends beyond the destruction and transformation brought about by conflict and war, to convey the post-violence life of things — in which their pasts, too, are being negotiated. We argue that to construct things as “relics” or “survivor objects”, as the conference *Survivor Objects: The Material Culture of Memory* (University of Delaware 2014; Klinger 2017) once proposed, and see them primarily as auratic carriers of historical trauma, obscures the fact that *surviving* is not an attribute but a process. This processual quality of objects bestows “survival in life” onto things; it frames their living on as dynamic and active.

The articles collected in this issue show that survival is, literally and figuratively, placed in the hands of the people who handle and interact with things. Relatives rescue the personal effects of loved ones and refashion them into mementoes and disturbing reminders of the violence they underwent. Museums display objects to tell the histories of violence. States elevate material traces of war and conflict to legitimize narratives of the past, relying on their affective qualities. Activists, too, present both visible and invisible things in politically charged memory performances. Thus the violence that objects underwent is rendered constitutive of their nature; it becomes their defining feature. But this violence is often denied or obscured by actors who exert their agency over objects. State agencies confiscate and nationalize things and make invisible their complex wartime biographies by means of legal regulations, renaming, repurposing, or dismantling. People involved in looting, both of the living and of the dead, often carefully erase any trace of the previous owners from appropriated things, to expunge their troubling historicity and the (economic) violence through which the objects were acquired. The specificity of surviving things invites, therefore, attentiveness to the *sociality* of objects and relationalities between subjects they convey – to the movement and circulation of things as commodities but also to practices that deny objects their changing meanings and identities, in order to obfuscate their acquisition in violence and their experience of survival.

Survival as a process also involves resistance and struggle (Bothe and Nesselrodt 2016). We argue that this notion, usually applied to human survival, can be extended to things as well. Indeed, it is embedded in their very materiality. As material entities, things both submit to and rebel against human intervention and signification, surviving through “continual deferral and deference” (Nakamura 2005: 23). Evading full human control, surviving things act upon people and exert their own forms of agency. The survival of objects is not merely social; it rests in their very materiality and their autonomous physicality (Latour 2005; Olsen 2013). In this special issue, therefore, we emphasise the constitutive role of materiality in shaping and affecting human realities and actions, and see this process as inherently relational, an exchange between objects and the subjects with whom they interact, as well as the postwar environments which they inhabit (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Those interactions are, of course, context specific. Even more than in other cases, the experience of co-presence in a post-conflict setting can spark affect and embodied response. Handling things in the aftermath of mass violence is both a distressing and a comforting affair; things can cause revulsion and fear, but they can also invite a desire to preserve and protect. And as some of the articles show, this is never a fully controlled and predictable affair – objects can struggle with their fragile physicality, they can resurface from shallow graves, disintegrate or fall apart when touched, rebelling at our attempts to understand and contain their troubling former lives.

We posit that things enjoy *material survival* also as a result of their physical endurance. Bearing traces of the travels and transformations they have undergone, things embody the past and carry it into the present (Domańska 2006; Olsen 2013). As shown in the articles in this issue, things make possible the material gathering of the past and its archiving in the present – for example, by aiding communities and individuals in forging links with cultural spaces that predate violence. The material survival of things assumes an existential dimension, grounding a fragile continuity of post-conflict life in what survives, in the durable and tangible. But as a material entity, the surviving thing retains an individual connection to violence, too. Conflict inflicts harm on its body and cripples it in ways that are event specific. Things recovered from burial pits and those preserved as mementoes will be inflicted with different kinds of wounds. Any object that survives war, genocide, or forced migration is a powerful “material witness” (Schuppli 2020), harbouring evidence of pre-conflict life, of violence, and of subsequent travels. The material survival of things reconfigures survival as a process in an active sense of bearing witness.

In this issue we show, however, that *materially absent* things can also survive mass violence and have a bearing on people’s social, emotional, and material lives in post-conflict

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3 settings. In the wake of destruction brought about by conflict and war, absence has a
4 particularly evocative power (Bille, Hastrup and Sorensen 2010). Missing and missed, stolen,
5 destroyed or irreversibly lost things function as powerful mnemonic objects: they become sites
6 of emotional and imaginative investment, taking centre stage in post-conflict narratives and
7 memory performances. The enduring power of lost objects sometimes lasts through generations
8 thanks to storytelling and transgenerational transmission of memory structured around
9 materially absent things. Those things *live on* to encode the loss of loved ones, as well as to
10 evoke the memory of wartime deprivation and of the struggles of personal and communal
11 survival. As some articles in this issue posit, dominant and/or ideologically charted narratives
12 about war often prioritize death or military loss over economic violence and dispossession,
13 relegating lost objects and their associated stories to domestic settings or even invalidating
14 them altogether.

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16 Finally, in this issue, we argue that attentiveness to social, affective, imaginative and
17 material survival of things has an ethical and political dimension. Surviving things can manifest
18 and bring into the present marginalized or silenced aspects of the past. This is especially
19 pertinent in contexts where violence remains contested, its traces subjected to physical and
20 symbolic appropriation by more powerful groups or actors; in contexts where economic
21 violence and systematic material dispossession remain unexplored in the historiography; and
22 in contexts of appropriation followed by repurposing and repudiation of the unique historicity
23 of things. By paying attention to the survival of things and their trajectories, we interpretively
24 restore links to violence, and thereby unsettle ownership claims and pose troubling questions
25 about post-conflict economic/political/material orders that were forged through theft and
26 enforced deprivation.

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45 **Contributions**

46 In our articles, we look at the surviving thing both synchronically and diachronically. Paola
47 Filippucci's article centres on the memorial significance of objects that survived the extreme
48 physical destruction of the Battle of Verdun (1919) to challenge our understanding of them as
49 mere tokens of absence or loss. She looks at the afterlives of nine villages erased during the
50 First World War, declared 'dead for France' by the state and incorporated into the memorial
51 landscape of the battlefield, and then reclaimed, a century after the battle, as sites of former
52 and enduring life by people identifying as descendants of their prewar inhabitants. Through a
53 series of discourses, practices, and rituals structured around physical remains of the lost
54 villages – and thus relying on emplaced materialities, personal objects, and historical

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3 photographs – the descendants restore affective and imaginative ties with familial and
4 communal pasts and invest the villages with a new lease of life. This is done in a critical tension
5 with the dominant, state-sponsored framing of the ruined villages as symbols of heroic national
6 sacrifice and sublime death. Drawing from Olsen (2013), Filippucci argues that the survival of
7 things, owing to their material durability, invests them with the power to affect how the past is
8 remembered and relived, as they transform the ruined villages into potent tokens of individual
9 and familial continuity and survival. But she also acknowledges that the hegemonic narrative
10 of death imposes limitations on this power, overwriting the local and embodied narrative of
11 life enacted and materialized in the villages by the descendants. It is the question of who
12 determines the identities of surviving things in the post-conflict setting that forms the central
13 concern of this article.

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15 Layla Renshaw's contribution takes up how narratives evolving and revolving around stolen
16 objects and material dispossession shape the memory of the Spanish Civil War (1936-9) and
17 its immediate aftermath. Since 2000, Spain has exhumed hundreds of mass graves dating back
18 to the period, opening space for critical engagement with the previously silenced past. The
19 investigative paradigm of mass graves foregrounds the role of physical traces – of forensically
20 recovered human remains and personal effects of the dead – in the quest to discover the truth,
21 restore identity and dignity to the dead, and offer closure to those who lost their relatives to
22 political violence. Renshaw raises critical issues with the basic premise of this paradigm by
23 focusing on a largely overlooked corpus of narratives which, with notable frequency,
24 accompany the investigations of mass graves and centre on absent objects – on things looted
25 from the victims by the perpetrators, and thus forever lost. Framed by Renshaw as *affective*
26 and *imaginative traces*, these materially absent objects act as mnemonic triggers for alternative,
27 gendered histories of Francoist violence and repression: stolen objects encode experiences of
28 dispossession and defeat shared by mothers and wives of the dead, still neglected in
29 historiographies of the Spanish Civil War and the years of dictatorship. Although absent, these
30 objects function as important narrative devices for transgenerational transmission of memory,
31 of invisible and invisibilized victimhood resulting from 'slow' economic and structural
32 violence. In Renshaw's text, the notion of *survivance* conceptually links the quality of lost
33 objects, absent and yet affectively and imaginatively present, and the biographies of
34 Republican women shaped by suffering but also by resilience. Similar to Filippucci, Renshaw
35 shows how objects, both present and materially absent, come to encode and mediate the human
36 experience of survival.

Zuzanna Dziuban looks at the material trajectories of things that negotiate a sensitive boundary between an object and human remains: gold teeth looted from the dead during and just after the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. While she shares with Renshaw a focus on the long-term implications of economic and political violence in the form of grave robbery, perpetrated in this case by the local populace on members of an othered minority, Dziuban centres her analysis on scarce but compelling accounts of how objects robbed from the dead are experienced, acted upon, and negotiated by the new (and rarely rightful) owners. Acknowledging the ambivalent ontological and epistemological condition of stolen gold teeth, Dziuban considers them through the conceptual lens of ‘atopic objects’, suspended on the threshold between private possessions and body parts of othered and violently dispossessed people. The article takes up the practical, affective, political, and legal framings through which atopic objects are constructed and reconstructed either as things or as human remains and become embedded in the postwar orders, both in the intimate order of the body and in the political-economic order of the state. But it argues, too, that their unsettling provenance and historicity allows atopic objects to act, and survive, as haunting reminders of the violence through which they were acquired.

Sarah De Nardi discusses the material absences that have shaped contemporary memory of the civil war between Fascists and anti-Fascists in Italy in 1943-5. Based on anthropological work in the small town of Vittorio Veneto in the northeast of Italy, De Nardi explores how the absence of surviving things activates and accommodates communal performances of memory, which both make do without objects and bring new things into being. Using Morisson’s concept of re-memory, De Nardi argues that the interplay between absent and present materialities of the conflict enables a commemoration that is deeply embodied and affectual. As such, the practices that she discusses here are an important way of engaging with the suppressed and shameful memories of the war that had divided this and many other communities in northern Italy. The various degrees of survival of the tangible and intangible memories of conflict denote a complex emotional economy of the war which, in Italy, is still unresolved.

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