

CHAPTER

3

Mobile Homes, Mobile Objects

Materiality and Mobility of Vietnamese-Belgian Couples

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Introduction

One afternoon during the summer of 2019, I met with Thiên¹ in the coffee shop in Ho Chi Minh City that she ran with her husband Jean. We shared a hot tea that she had carefully laid on a handmade coaster, and for about four hours she candidly shared her experiences of being a wife to a Belgian in Vietnam. At one point, Thiên playfully talked about their sofa and Jean's furniture taste. The next day, Jean revealed that he had been listening to our conversation on the surveillance camera of their coffee shop while he was at home on that same sofa. He then told his migration story and that of the sofa—and why, whether Thiên found it beautiful or not, it stayed in the living room.

Thiên and Jean's comments about the furniture present for us the world of mixed couples through the lens of material culture where this exploratory study stems from—the possibility of locating the lived experiences of couples through the everyday objects in their homes. Home is the central part of the daily life of most people, even in mobility. The idea of “home” is often described as the dynamic attachment to a place, experiences, emotions, and relationships (Boccagni 2017). Home is also a contested and processual space of belonging that makes conjugal mixedness an interesting, fittingly illustrative analytical case. This concept of mixedness is drawn

from Collet (2012), who treats conjugal mixedness “not only [as] a question of different cultures but one of conformity or deviance with regard to social norms” (71). Mixed couples are mostly mobile, and differ not only in terms of origin but also in their lifestyle and habitus. They, therefore, have to negotiate their diverse cultural backgrounds in the aesthetic of their homes.

Ethnography of Home Objects

This study is *ethnographic* in nature, *object-based* and *multi-sited*. The findings discussed in this chapter are informed by ongoing fieldwork in Belgium and Vietnam. The empirical data was gathered from the beginning of March 2019, and sporadically conducted throughout the year in Brussels, Wallonia, and Flanders. The Vietnam fieldwork covered Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. For this chapter, ten Belgian-Vietnamese couples have been interviewed.

This study is a domestic ethnography focusing on materialities such as interior decors and objects in the present, past, and aspirational homes. The research is done through the researcher’s home visits and home stays. Whenever the home is not accessible, interviews are held in Vietnamese restaurants, coffee shops, cultural organizations, and workspaces, which are also important sites of everyday routines and life environments of research participants. Informants were initially recruited through the Embassy of Belgium in Hanoi, associations in Ho Chi Minh City and Brussels, and informal contacts—and then through snowballing.

As the study attempts to situate the representations and construction of home in material and multi-sensorial ways, the methodology of this research is guided by a participatory visual technique like photo/image elicitation and, most critically, object-based interviews. Photo-elicitation is a classic approach in ethnography that uses photographs to prompt responses during interviews (Harper 1998), while object interviews incorporate objects in the process of interviews (Woodward 2020). Initially, participants are asked to draw the floor plan, structure, or spaces within their homes. They are also instructed to bring objects with them, or to use the things they carry on a daily basis. Likewise, they are asked to take photographs of home objects and decorations, as well as of the spaces where they are located. They also imagine and visualize objects that are available or aspirational, and speak about them. In this approach, objects become active participants in the interviews, as this study closely follows the biography and agency of objects—from how they are made, collected, used, bought, sold, or given away, how they travel

and cross-national boundaries, how they get to spaces in the house like the living room, how they map the domestic space—to the meanings and values the couple give to them, or the individual meanings they impute to these objects.

Finally, following objects is also a central part of “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus 1995) to comparatively and fully account for the lived experiences of Vietnamese-Belgian couples “here and there” on transnational and translocal levels (Faist 2004). The inquiry is then not confined to those who move but also acknowledges their sedentary counterpart. Accounts of stay-behind families in their past and present homes, and the consequent flow of objects between these two social spaces (Belgium and Vietnam), are also crucial. This mobility of objects between two countries are contextual and material indices of transnational activities such as the presence of carried, sent, and received objects in their homes.

Agency of Objects and Materiality of the Home

The twenty-first century marked the proliferation of studies of migration using transnational perspectives. It witnessed paradigmatic shifts as “the focus moved from migration to the migrants and from transnationalism to transnationals” (Dunn 2010). While this embodied transnationalism leans toward an agency-oriented approach, the study of migration remains confined to the understanding of the mobility of people, and overlooks other sources of agency. Veering away from the conventional focus on migrants alone, this study intends to diversify perspectives on migration studies by looking at how objects narrate the biographies and experiences of migrants.

As the study shifts to human-object interaction, it addresses and redresses consumer culture by appropriating mass-produced objects into meaningful relationships of people and things through the ways they are used. Consumption in this perspective decommodifies and humanizes objects (Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1995, 1998, 2001, 2009). This perspective is closer to that of Gell (1998) and his concept of distributed agency of art objects, existing independently of the volition of the artist. The mobility and agency of these objects, as he contends, is not mere aesthetics but social agents, suggestive of what Appadurai (1986) prominently phrases as the “social life of things.” Appadurai, in his more recent writing, has advanced this idea—which has come to be a preoccupation among new materialists—arguing that objects are not just “actants” (Latour 2005) but “mediants” with specific materialities that foreground forms of socialities (Appadurai 2015: 228). To employ this idea into the study of home objects means

veering away from the abstraction of home as a symbol, and redirecting the emphasis to the mutually constitutive entanglement of people and things. This agentic tendency of objects clearly withdraws from the idea that commodities are dead material, purportedly fetishized and alienate people, as the usual reductive and materialistic perspectives suggest. Instead, people's relationship with things could reflect social meanings and relationships. As Inglis (2005) illustrates with the example of a person's relationship with a car, "turning to see if the car is 'all right' is perhaps associated with pride in ownership or fear of reprimand from the traffic authorities. If the former, then the behavior is connected to the pride in material objects that predominates in a highly consumerist society; if the latter, then it is connected to a characteristic aspect of the culture of social modernity, namely the bureaucratization of everyday life" (ibid.: 25).

To locate the agency of objects, this study is informed by and anchored to the anthropological and sociological literature of material culture and home. The diverse literature on the materiality of the home has its roots in the work of Bourdieu (1970) on the Kabyle house. He observes how dwelling places hint a structured worldview, and this will later appear to be crucial in his concept of "habitus" (1977). This seminal work opens up the space of the house as an interesting site of inquiry, gives rise to the conceptual differentiation between "house" and "home,"² and ushers into academic discussion the more affective and social performative aspect of domesticity and consumption (Ardener 1981; Douglas 1991; Humphrey 1988; Jackson and Moores 2014; Morgan 1881; Putnam and Newton 1990; Stea 1995; Tucker 1994; Wilk 1989).

Home objects³ as an anthropological topic starts to be more concrete and visible in the popular works of Miller (1995, 1998, 2001, 2009; see also Cieraad 1999; Daniels 2010; Gregson 2007). Miller's writings on the materiality of the home (and chapters from scholars' writings on home ethnography) focus on how people make objects and space home-like through furnishing, decoration, renovation, and consumption practices, and also reflect biographies, identities, relationships, and social class in the United Kingdom. Hurdley (2006, 2007, 2015, 2016) has also consistently published on how and why people display objects in their homes through her case study on mantelpieces in British homes—the same field site as Miller's. Other works on home objects not only look closely at objects on display but also consider objects that are out of sight, stored in the attic/garage or hidden away in boxes or drawers, like the writings of Newell (2014, 2019) on the US domestic space, and Woodward (2015) on that in the UK.

Studies on the relationship between home objects and couples are rather scant. One exception is the book by Kaufmann (1998) entitled *Dirty*

Linen: Couples and their Laundry. As the title suggests, this study introduces a material perspective into the study of everyday domestic life of couples in France. However, focusing on the democratization of family life and depicting laundry as a domestic chore, Kaufmann, as might be expected, illustrates the role of the washing machine and dirty clothes in a performative manner rather than focusing more on the everyday materiality in couples' lives, making the object secondary to his inquiry. The earlier article of Bloch (1995) is rather more materially relevant, as his inquiry looks closely at material practices of Zafimaniry couples in Madagascar, and how they transform their houses over time—such as how wood carvings are incorporated in the different stages of a couple's life. As the family progresses, like the birth of the first child, the house is redecorated and renovated. It becomes increasingly stable, concrete, and decorative, reflecting the couple's changing roles as the family matures. My study leans toward this treatment of objects, but it focuses on their roles in the mobile homes of mixed couples.

My ongoing inquiry into mobile objects attempts to incorporate migration into the study of objects, and objects into the study of migration. While anthropologists and sociologists started to pay closer attention to home objects in the past decades, as seen in the previous discussion, the focus on home objects is a recent interest in migration studies. What has been written so far is a theoretical and methodological toolkit that advances the concept of home as a core subject in migration studies, as seen in the work of Boccagni (2017) who reintroduces home through the prism of mobility, where home is rendered as dynamic, mutable, relational, contextual, experiential, portable, and reproducible, both in material and experiential ways. To capture this processual component of the home experience more clearly, he coins the term “homing” to categorically embody the ongoingness of the social experience of people in mobility. Adopting this theoretical perspective, *mobile objects* in this chapter are conceived as material consequences of the mobility of people and their search for homes. This emphasis on mobility stems from the need to fix fluidity in the homing process that circumscribes around remembrance, belonging, and aspirations, “the origins (roots) and their evolving life milieus (routes)” (Boccagni 2017, cited in Marilla 2020: 118).

I will extend this homing perspective in the next section by discussing the different attributes of these mobile objects based on empirical data. The experience of mixed couples reveals that the typology of mobile objects is not just confined to spatial mobility but also has a *temporal* dimension. As objects move from one space and/or time context to another, the objects create their own social lives and biographies. These movements also lead to a *flow of meanings*, often as the consequence of the

change in the life course of the couple, or as home objects become available to different cultural audiences or “interpretive communities” (Fish 1980).

Spatial Mobility of Objects

How objects travel from one space to another has an intensified role in the decision-making process between what couples bring or keep and what they discard. This spatial mobility, as might be expected, pertains to *objects crossing borders* within a transnational frame—for example, how they move from Vietnam to Belgium and vice versa—and the consequent transnational relationships of these material movements to both the receiving and the sending communities. However, based on my ethnography of the home, movements of things within the more micro-level perspective are equally relevant but not usually acknowledged, such as the mobility of home objects from the private space to a public space and movements within the domestic space.

Objects Crossing Borders

Jean had been living in Ho Chi Minh City for five years following the success of his business venture that he originally started through his visits in the Mekong Delta in 2015, which is where he met his wife, Thiên. When he moved to Vietnam, he carried along with him only two suitcases. After living in five different countries as a businessman, he describes himself as someone who lives out of a suitcase and is readily open to moving. While he can pack light as he moves, he reveals that he always makes sure he can ship his sofa, which has been with him for twenty years in three different countries. He confides: “I made furniture in Indonesia in 2000. I was a furniture builder. My furniture has followed me from Jepara to Dubai to here [Ho Chi Minh City].” Thiên, on the other hand, has never lived outside of Vietnam but takes occasional short business trips to Belgium or France during winter months. She shares that she let her husband choose the stuff to put in their house, even though she does not like his choices. She says, laughingly:

I don’t want to take you to our house, it’s ugly. It’s not presentable. I let him decide for the house. He brought a wooden sofa set and a modern table that don’t fit together. The house is also empty and bare without any color. I don’t bring my friends there; we meet in the coffee shop.

Jean admits that he does not have the time to tidy up:

I rented a house, and about three years ago the owner doubled the rent, so I moved since that time. I did this and that, then broke my leg. I really don't have time to do it. I still have boxes everywhere. It's still a big mess.

The experience of Jean and Thiên offers a layered understanding of the domestic life of spatially mobile mixed couples that likewise echoes their social lives. It illustrates how couples negotiate decorating—who decides what objects get to be displayed, and the way they are arranged. First, the spatial movement of the objects reflects the biography of the migrant. The way the object travels records the movement of the migrant as well as peeking into his past life and past homes. Hence, the spatial mobility of the owner is tangled with that of the objects in his/her home. The migrant invests emotions and care into the object. Its migratory history, therefore, awards it the right of a personal heirloom, to be installed in the key space of the home such as the living room, regardless of the displeasure of the partner, other members of the household, or guests. Citing Mauss, Newell (2019) reminds us that precious things form the magic that “speaks, attaches itself to its possessor, which contains its soul” (129; translated, original in French).

Second, at first glance, the person in mobility decides on the home furnishings, and the decision is not necessarily out of a gender-based domestic routine. However, Jean rents the house and monitors the shop through the surveillance camera, even if Thiên is the one managing it full time. This situation discloses that conjugal decisions can be linked to economic and power relations. Furthermore, the remark of distaste by Thiên reverses the scenario and circles back on how women are supposedly responsible for ensuring that the interior of the home is beautiful and tidy. It is this sense of frustration, and not necessarily because the home is private, that inhibits Thiên from opening her doors to visitors. In this case, objects and how they are arranged inhabit the intersection of the personal and the social. Certain ordering of objects creates binaries—organized vs. messy, beautiful vs. ugly—reminiscent of the classic writing of Douglas (1991) on how social life is organized into binaries of order vs. disorder, good vs. bad, pure vs. impure. These categories are structural issues that compel Thiên to close the doors of their home from the public gaze.

Moreover, this is aligned with certain gender expectations in Vietnam as reflected by the popular proverb “*Đàn ông xây nhà, đàn bà xây tổ ấm*” (men build the house, women build the home), which often comes out as a response when Vietnamese informants are asked about the idea of house and home. In Southeast Asian societies, proverbs and metaphors

are especially important rhetorical devices for expressing the roles of men and women (for example, see Fresnoza-Flot 2020). The metaphor of the woman as the homemaker is material and performative, as homeliness is also attributed to coziness and warmth, a form of mothering of space. The ethnographic data of Brickell (2013) also corroborates that this proverbial utterance of home in contemporary Vietnam is “often assumed as natural and self-evident in its inscription of gendered difference, despite the changes in the social spaces that women frequent” (217). This is despite the economic reforms since the *Đổi Mới* in 1986 that account for the urbanization of and expanding migration into Ho Chi Minh City, where 450 out of the 650 registered Belgians reside (2019 statistics from the Embassy of Belgium in Hanoi). As King and Wilder (2003) add, these broader economic and societal shifts “tend to be qualified by a baseline gender system that continues to root a nostalgic vision of femininity to the domestic, despite changing macro-economic circumstances” (cited in Brickell 2013: 212).

Objects crossing borders also reflect transnational connections. During my fieldwork in Hanoi in 2019, a grandfather asked me to bring a set of story books written in Vietnamese for his granddaughter, Marie. The books were lovingly received by the family who live in Brussels, and the books are now displayed on a small shelf in the corner of the living room of their apartment. Thuy, the mother, who has lived in Belgium for almost a decade, says that Marie’s weekends are mainly devoted to learning Vietnamese culture and language through a cultural organization where she also meets, mingles and shares her books with other children of Vietnamese or other mixed couples. Thuy also makes sure that Marie talks to her family back in Vietnam through video calls. When I visited Thuy’s parents’ home in Hanoi, several framed photographs of Marie were noticeably displayed around the house; their presence appears to be a way for them to negotiate her absence. The grandparents spoke about how Marie was very beautiful, with beautiful hair, beautiful skin and beautiful eyes. Her photographs are enmeshed with the aesthetic of the house, the pride of the family, and are material evidence of the mobility of the status of the stay-behind family. This attests that mobility does not only concern those who migrate but also involves their sedentary counterparts, the stay-behind families in their past homes. As Barber (2017) relates to and borrows the idea of Thai (2011) during her fieldwork among second-generation Việt Kiều (overseas Vietnamese) in the UK, she describes this generation’s strategies—like learning the language and return visits⁴ to Vietnam—as “magnified moments of ethnic authentication” among second-generation Vietnamese (Barber 2017: 2). What she missed, however, is the role of gift circulation in magnifying those moments of building and maintaining ethnic authenticity. The flow of objects within the social space linking Belgium and Vietnam are crucial not

only in preserving kinship ties but also in reinforcing these ties and ethnic identities. Likewise, the *Tết* (Vietnamese new year) is an important period when objects circulate all the more, which for some of my informants is considered as homecoming.

Aside from considering the sedentary human counterpart, mobility of objects is also about accounting for immobile objects. The objects that move and cross borders are entangled with the objects that remain immobile and stay-behind. As Julien shares:

I wanted to decorate my house with books, put up a library because I enjoy reading as a hobby. Almost everything on the TV, in the bookstore, is in Vietnamese language, but I am unable to bring my books because of restrictions and censorship in Vietnam. I also left my CD collection that I collected when I was younger. I left it in Belgium and entrusted it to my son. I just have my old iPhone, I use it for music.

This manifests “regimes of mobility” (Schiller and Salazar 2013) where nation-states impose barriers to justify their emigration and immigration policies. On the one hand, these strategies of inclusion and exclusion are not limited to the question of *who* crosses state borders but also *what* is permitted or not allowed to move, making (im)mobility of objects contained by the larger Vietnamese state policies. On the other hand, seen from a micro-level perspective, (im)mobility of objects impacts migrants’ emotions and ways of feeling at home, making the mobility of objects across frontiers equally important as mobility of people. Here, objects transform into memorialized items and provide a glimpse into past homes while reflecting on social experiences in the present home. However, while the object remains immobile, its social life continues, like a stay-behind family or a child who is likewise entrusted for care.

Mobility of Home Objects from Private Spaces to (Semi-)public Spaces

Based on my observation during frequent visits to a number of Vietnamese restaurants in Belgium,⁵ restaurants are extensions of the home and hospitality, or as home-like social spaces often frequented or owned by some mixed couples. In a restaurant owned by Mai and Phillippe, a reproduction of the infamous Tô Ngọc Vân’s *Thiếu nữ bên hoa huệ* (young woman with lily, 1943) is hanging on the restaurant’s wall with a bright yellow spotlight underneath, rendering a bright glow on the subject of the painting—a lady with her white lilies and wearing a white *áo dài*. The mobile trajectory of the painting is rather striking. As a wedding gift, it traveled from Hanoi to Saigon, and then journeyed to Belgium and lived in various rental

apartments before moving to their newly bought house, following the success of the restaurant. Now, it hangs in the restaurant, making the object available in a semi-public space.

My research into the painting linked me to the larger Vietnamese history and the French connection. Tô Ngọc Vân was schooled in the French academia, *Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine* in the twentieth century, and painted the *Thiếu nữ bên hoa huệ* (young woman with lily) in 1943. An art historian verifies:

These paintings [the works of Tô Ngọc Vân] reflect the artist's academic training in composition and color harmony. The abundance of bright hues and flowers makes the pictures cheerful and decorative. Unlike other portraits, however, the women's features are not drawn realistically but are sketched with minimum detail. If the artist had models, he subordinated their individuality to their surroundings, presenting them as mere decorative motifs set against a floral background. (Taylor 1997: 15)

The image, through its long history of mobility, continues to inhabit different spaces and is not just locked away in the confines of the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Fine Arts—a moment when historical art objects become everyday objects. While this is another art-historical-anthropological topic of concern, what is equally impressive is the liveliness and vibrancy of the painting as an everyday object that further activates the image's energy, dynamism, and social life. Here, the painting, as Gell (1998) contends, like Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* [1902], is “a *process*, a movement of *duree*, rather than as a ‘thing’” (244, emphasis in original). This flow of the image is then attached to the trajectory of the object itself, and also reflective of the changing milieus in the life of the couple as narrated through the movement of the object itself in an accessible visual form. It is the biography of the object and that of the couple that enables the painting to be available to the gaze of different interpretive communities in a public space.

Aside from commercial spaces, the workspace is also an extension of the home. The placement of objects on the office table and on shelves are ways of homing. Hurdley (2015)⁶ paraphrases this as ways of “making home, identity and belonging in a workplace.” For example, David, a Belgian man in this study, owns a vintage ceramic teacup that he had taken out of their kitchen to his workplace. He jokingly said that he had to receive consent from Ahn, his wife, to bring it to work. The cup is now displayed on his office table alongside a golden *maneki-neko*, a common motored cat waving in good fortune, which is a staple in Asian households and stores. Bình, a Vietnamese colleague of David, also owns a *maneki-neko*, which sits on his home desk. He captures it in a photo and fondly sends it to his work

colleagues, saying “it gives me company,” during the Covid-19 quarantine in Belgium. When David was asked what meanings the teacup and *maneki-neko* had for him, he explained that as the desks all look the same in his corporate office in Belgium, these items from home make his desk unique and different from the rest, so he can easily spot it. They also become subjects that can spark a conversation with people that come to his desk—and, as he candidly added, it is a way to introduce his wife. Here, the objects act both as performance for the self and others, making the office table a site of identities and social encounters. The office table is thus transformed into a personalized space that invokes a feeling of intimacy and lays out familial status and an image of how life is organized within a network of relations.

Objects’ Mobility within the Home

How objects are socialized to occupy certain spaces and how they move within the confines of the home is another aspect of spatial mobility of objects on the micro level. Pierre shared that his possessions in the house moved a lot when Nga moved in with him. As a young couple, they cannot afford to change the interior completely, and Nga has opted to rearrange objects instead. Nga had added a makeshift altar placed in picture frames that she had put on a coffee table. These impermanent fixtures express the couple’s mobility on a temporal and spatial level, as they want to buy a house of their own in the future, but in the meantime they are opting for more mobile, less expensive home decors that they can readily buy from IKEA. On the one hand, Nga intends to feel at home in her new place by reorganizing the interior. Often, the main reason given for the propensity to rearrange the domestic interior relates to feelings of newness or difference, or the need for dynamism in the space (Garvey 2001). Pierre, on the other hand, feels disoriented by these movements that consequently become a source of conflict between them. He narrated that in the beginning he did not mind Nga redecorating the house. However, as things get moved, he starts to feel lost in his own home as he even needs to ask Nga even for the wine opener, which had formerly been housed in his mini bar but was later moved to the kitchen drawer. As Nga became more familiar with the place, Pierre felt more unfamiliar, caused by the movement of objects. Pierre’s experience can be explained by Warnier (2006)’s theory that the bodily schema is integrated into the arrangement of the domestic space, and a change of location of a given piece of furniture means relearning motor algorithms to search for objects in their new locations (187). In this sense, objects operate within a system and are socialized to occupy their own social spaces where rules are followed, like storing them according to certain spaces designated for them. This also points to the question of routine.

Giddens (1991) postulates that orientations toward aspects of the object world are an early involvement with routine, and these symbolic residues will be carried into later life (cited in Garvey 2001: 54).

Some couples, to avoid conflict and negotiate difference, may label some objects as personal rather than conjugal, or create their personal spaces within the house:

Thiên: We have two TVs. He watches with loud sound so I wait until he sleeps so I can watch in peace and stay up late. He also always looks at the news about terrorism, fighting and something like that. Me, I only like something soft and sweet like love songs, sweet music, love stories, and romantic movies.

Jean: No, because I also like cars and speed, about mechanical stuff. It's missing a little bit here [Vietnam]. So I just watch movies about these stuffs. I also watch news in French, English. I watch on TV5 in French, CNN, Discovery, NatGeo.

Frictions between previous lifestyles and current confluences of taste are rather apparent in this empirical example, displaying tensions around how couples negotiate differences. The consequence may be a nuanced sense of “personal” versus “conjugal” space in the home, or a unique experience of couples’ ways of belonging and senses of homeliness. The relationship of people and things, whether these objects move from one space to another or stay put in the fixed spaces they occupy, are glimpses of how these couples negotiate their differences in their everyday domestic lives. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) describe, individualization, democracy, and chaos are the norm in a couple’s life in modern society.

The Temporal Dimension: Objects’ Ongoingness and Decay

Aside from the flows of objects in different spatial contexts, mobility of objects is also rooted in time and memory. Sarah, whose father is Vietnamese and whose mother is Belgian, shows me a photo that she captured and posted on her social media with the caption “*décoration familiale, détail*” (family decoration, detail). In the photo is an image of a golden Buddha, with cracked paint and showing visible signs of deterioration, which sits on a vintage cabinet with intricate designs. While looking at the photograph, Sarah recalls her life when she was still living with her parents through the objects in the picture:

My dad got a Buddha, it was an old one and [he] painted it gold because gold is shiny, [and] it means prosperity. He usually repaints the decorations in gold, even the cabinet. There are a lot of objects

in the house that are Vietnamese. When my friends come, they say our house looks like a Chinese restaurant. I remember, we moved into the house in Wallonia when I was five. I remember growing up we [always] went to a special shop to buy the decorations for the house. I can't remember where but I remember it was a special one that we go to during weekends where my dad buys stuff. I am not sure if it's an antique shop, Asian shop or a *brocante* (flea market).

Sarah continues, and remembers her father's migration story through the biography of objects:

My dad came to France during the 1970s. He was studying there together with his brother. During the war, my grandfather cannot send money anymore, and so my dad didn't continue his studies and started working until he moved to Belgium and met my mom. He waited to come back to Vietnam. After about thirty years, my dad came back to Vietnam. They [the parents] now go to Saigon—I mean Ho Chi Minh City—every year, and they bring back new decorations from Vietnam each time. And so the house is filled with Vietnamese stuff.

Sarah remembers her past home as lived experience through objects. The statue of Buddha and the cabinet also reflect the object's changing ownership and materiality, as her father, the new owner and caretaker of these old objects, transforms and repaints them to ascribe a sense of newness to them. Here, objects are not reduced to dead materiality but are instead viewed as dynamic and ongoing. They age, move across time, and are transformed and recontextualized in their changing life milieus. This is congruent with how circulation transforms secondhand things: "Rather than merely having cultural biographies, secondhand things are reconfigured through *their shifts between different social contexts in a process that here is understood as a form of growing*" (Appelgren and Bohlin 2015: 143, emphasis added). In addition, as Ingold convinces:

Far from being the inanimate stuff typically envisioned by modern thought, materials in this original sense are the active constituents of a world-in-formation. Wherever life is going on, they are relentlessly *on the move—flowing, scraping, mixing and mutating*. The existence of all living organisms is caught up in this ceaseless respiratory and metabolic interchange between their bodily substances and the fluxes of the medium. Without it, they could not survive. (Ingold 2007: 11, emphasis added)

Here, the object is not frozen in time devoid of its ephemeral quality but instead assumes a sense of "vitality" (Bennet 2010). But like the stay-behind objects, the life course, the liveliness, and the ongoingness of things endure,

not necessarily because they are mended, reused, or renovated, but because they age, break down over time, and decay.

Moreover, the time dimension in the object's mobility also relates to the life course of the couple (recall Nga's makeshift altar). As the couple move from one place to another or advance the stage of their relationship—from living together as a young couple, to marriage, to building a family—home decorations move and change as well. For example, the house of Thuy and Paul in Brussels became more decorated with Vietnamese objects the moment Marie was born. Some objects that Thuy hid away in boxes, like the traditional umbrella made out of bamboo, which was only used in performances during the *Tết*, is now displayed near the mantelpiece. Here, Thuy introduces her partner and/or kids to her past home, culture, and lifestyle as she relives her gender expectation as the homemaker (*đàn bà xây tổ ấm*) through mothering of the home space.

Flow of Meanings and Material-Social Relations

Meaning-making is a cultural experience. The transfer and translation of objects in space and time also means an ongoing construction of meaning. For example, the image of Buddha and domestic shrines is a specific cultural object at the center of Vietnamese households. Apart from these objects being a spiritual center of the home, and thus symbolic, the materiality of religious objects in the home makes them status markers that are “semiotically interpreted or manipulated as indices of social status” (Riggins 2013: 42). For example, the statue of *Thổ Công*, lord of the soil and the ground, and a strong symbol of settlement, is often found in houses of middle-class families in Vietnam, and in some established Vietnamese places in Belgium. It only exists, however, in the homes of Vietnamese families who have been living in Belgium for a very long time. The presence of this object in the home signifies permanency and high status in the migratory chain. While statues such as that of *Thổ Công* are only found in some of the migrants' homes, what is more common in the homes of my informants, especially those with children, is an altar to honor ancestors. The altar⁷ typically includes framed photographs of family members who have passed away, alongside incense and vase(s) for flowers, and some offerings of food and tea. Ancestor worship has an important place in Vietnamese families, including mixed-race couples. The altar is a specific cultural object at the center of a Vietnamese household, but is an alien material to the Belgian partner. In some cases, they are reduced to secular and mundane objects, perceived by the Belgian partner as mere decoration and aesthetic of the house, and devoid of its symbolic meaning as a spiritual object. Hence, a multitude of

meanings can arise at different levels, traversing through different subjectivities and demographic biographies—like the meaning that Sarah (Belgian, second-generation Vietnamese, mixed) attaches to Buddha and the altar may be particularly distinct from that of her father (Vietnamese migrant, first-generation) and her mother (Belgian).⁸

Meanings here are contingent upon and co-constructed by different interpretive communities. It is important to note that interpretive communities do not consist merely of audiences but, as in the sense Fish (1980) developed the concept, it pertains to anyone to whom cultural objects are available for interpretation—that is, from the production of the object to its consumption. This meaningful interaction between people and objects makes people active producers of meaning rather than passive consumers. For home objects, meanings are diversified as the objects move across and between spaces, and as the home becomes available for public gaze where it enters into a duality as a private and public space. Usually, the living and dining rooms are public spaces that display heirlooms available for potential scrutiny and judgment by visitors. For instance, Thuy displays, in a glass cupboard, a set of ceramic teacups that she received from her departed grandma that she reserves for very special occasions and guests; in her words, “it is rarely used so as to be preserved and taken care of.” In Newell’s (2014) study on hoarding, these heirlooms on display are also “‘durables’ [that] tend to have a provenance in the established capital that allows for the maintenance of stable kin relations, or even in some cases enforces it for the sake of holding the wealth intact” (202). Newell calls these objects “kin-objects”:

While in consumption theory possessions are typically thought of as “extensions of the self” under the control of their master (Belk 1988), it is worth considering the reverse possibility, in which the spirits of things also get a hold of us and refuse to let go. It is in this sense that these objects assert their claim to “belonging” as members of the household, even when sequestered out of the space of sociality ... Things thus have agency not merely in the Latourian sense of resisting our efforts at cultural mastery but also in the sense that they engage us socially, obligating us to treat them in specific ways. (Newell 2014: 196)

Like the story of Jean’s sofa at the beginning of this chapter, Thuy’s teacups demand a territorial claim in the house, seeking to be accommodated and cared for as members of the household. The relationships of Jean and Thuy with their objects, and their actions toward them, are an act of hospitality (Newell 2019). Objects, in turn, have the ability to reciprocate, like Binh’s *maneki-neko* offering him company during the quarantine. This agency of animate and humanlike qualities of objects and their sociability

are concrete entanglements of people and things, and of the meanings and relationships that organize the mobile social lives of people and objects.

Conclusion

The trajectories of objects are routes into understanding forms of tangled (im)mobilities that lead to insights on how (im)mobile social lives are organized, reflecting relationships and ambiguities in the everyday domestic lives of mixed couples. They negotiate and perform their identities in the confines of their own homes. The home objects that they own and value reveal their own trajectories, and their personal experiences in their past and present homes, as well as their future aspirations. This process of home-making, a complex act of belonging to “a basic sense of home, is informed by the home cultures that people bring from the past—[for example,] the ways of using domestic space, the meanings and functions of domestic objects and the implicit views of what a ‘proper home’ should look like” (Boccagni 2017: 54). Boccagni adds that “migrants’ present home experience is interdependent with the past one(s), as recollected through home-related objects and rituals” (ibid.: 78). This dynamic process of homing, as this chapter suggests, reveals the entanglements of peoples and things; how in the process of human mobility, immobile and mobile objects are entangled and how these mobilities result in entanglements of temporalities, and change meanings in the spaces that these objects occupy.

The material component of the home is under analyzed, even if the lives of people and the lives of things are enmeshed in everyday life. The analysis of the entanglements of peoples and things moves the object out of inertia and brings it active qualities as a vibrant matter (Bennett 2010). Objects possess agency (Gell 1998) and do not just reflect meaning. They compel people to act in certain ways and endow them with care, hospitality, and territoriality as members of the household (Newell 2014, 2019). The migratory trajectory of the objects all the more assert this belongingness as the emblem of the trajectory of their owner, making them worthy of their visual performance and display in the public space of the household. This dynamic relationship between people and objects allows us to appreciate and understand the non-verbalized, the visual, material, sensual, and embodied, consequently offering a methodological possibility of an object-based ethnography where we can let the objects speak and narrate the stories of people.

While trajectories of people and things overlap, entanglements of mobilities and immobilities of objects are also apparent. For people on the move, people lose and take things along the way, stirring memories of loss and

hopes through what they are able and allowed to bring, and what they needed to leave behind. These objects of remembrance not only speak about their past homes, their connections and relationships with their stay-behind families and stay-behind possessions, but also account for the homeliness in their present homes.

As objects move, their meanings change in relation to their changing temporal and spatial contexts. They are invested with meanings that emerge through association and usage that also vary with regard to the relationship people have with objects across contexts. This flow of the object in time and space ascribes a sense of ongoingness to the object, because the object is entangled with people's biographies and changing life milieus. This makes the home objects dynamic, mutable, relational, experiential, and contextual, as the overall idea of homing suggests.

These entanglements and complexities in the home experience are materially expressed in things that reproduce a couple's past and present tastes and lifestyles, resulting in appropriation and symbolic boundaries within the home, transnational connections, and the gendering of space. Home objects also become material indices of ethnicity, gender, cultural practices, and social status. As objects narrate these identities, they are moved out of their inanimate fixedness and rigidities, and transformed into moving, animate, agentic entities that activate their meaningful social lives.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the guidance, thoroughness, and valuable comments of my supervisor, Dr. Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot. I also appreciate the questions and comments from my colleagues in the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie des Mondes Contemporains (LAMC) and the Center for East Asian Studies (EASt) whose feedback has been incorporated in this chapter. Most specially, thanks to the couples and their families who generously shared their time, experiences, and opened their homes to this research.

Funding

This ongoing research project is currently funded by the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS), from October 2020 to September 2024. It also received a two-year funding (February 2019 – September 2020) from the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)-ARC through Dr. Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot's project *Contextual Mobility in Europe-Southeast Asia Social Spaces: Belgian-Vietnamese and Belgian-Laotian Couples in Focus*.

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NOTES

1. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of research participants.
2. The lengthy literature on the distinction between house and home is recently revisited and well detailed in the essay of Samanai and Lenhard (2019), which often delineates the idea of “houses as normative, widely reproduced, and often material forms, while homes center around the subjective feelings of belonging and dwelling” (13).
3. Home objects are also labeled as domestic objects in the literature. However, the term “domestic object” is not used interchangeably with “home object” in this chapter. I refer to these objects as home objects to emphasize the concept of “home,” which is crucial to migration studies. This is also to avoid some confusion on categorization when one talks about domestic objects. For example, Riggins (2013), in his article on the home as an ephemeral art project, attempts to fit domestic objects into categories (refer to Kannike and Laviolette 2013: 40–42). I find that loosely casting home objects into categories is problematic. Based on my fieldwork, home objects are dynamic, fluid, and mutable (in this chapter, I refer to them as “mobile” objects) and cannot be readily catalogued or classified. For example, as the life course of the couple changes or advances, meanings and uses of objects could change simultaneously, and hence cannot be strictly cast into rigid categories. Categories could also overlap, and/or objects could be refused for categorization.
4. It can be represented and linked to the 2008 song “Hello Vietnam” (original in French, *Bonjour Vietnam*, released earlier in 2006), a popular *Việt Kiều* song sang by Quynh Anh, a Belgian-Vietnamese singer in Belgium. The song is about the longing for “homeland.”
5. Based on my survey, there are over a hundred Vietnamese restaurants in Belgium, signifying that there have been thriving Vietnamese communities in the three regions of Belgium—around thirty-four in Wallonia, twenty-one in Flanders and about fifty-one concentrated in Brussels (data mapped through Google Maps as of June 2020).
6. Also listen to BBC radio episode “Land Ownership, Home at Work,” 5 December 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b06r5y7b>, last accessed on 4 March 2020.

7. Anchored on the belief that the dead people were buried in the ground but that their souls live, “*từ tuất quy thổ, cốt nhục tâu, hạ âm vi giá thổ, kỳ phí phát đường ư thượng vi chiêu minh*” (Vu and Nguyen 2019: 162).
8. An ongoing fieldwork; my home visit to Sarah’s parents’ house in Wallonia is hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic, making it a challenge to do ethnography of the home and its materiality, where home visits and object interviews are crucial, as this contact is a complete sensory experience (as discussed elsewhere in this chapter).

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