

BOOK REVIEW

THE IDENTITY OF DISPLACEMENT: TRANSLATING MIGRANT EXPERIENCE THROUGH OBJECTS

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Translation and Objects: Rewriting Migrancy and Displacement through the Materiality of Art, M^a Carmen África Vidal Claramonte, London and New York: Routledge, 2025, 162 pp., £35.99 (paperback) ISBN 9781032795195, £32.39 (ebook) ISBN 9781003488170.

Objects tell stories: in the same way as meaning, they can be transported. And in the same way as language, they can be part of a person's identity, especially for individuals who have been displaced and travel with both intangible and tangible baggage. Objects thus undergo a process of translation. But how can the interactions between humans and their possessions be understood as acts of translation? Can non-linguistic and non-verbal aspects of life be sources of meaning? These are some of the questions that *Translation and Objects: Rewriting Migrancy and Displacement through the Materiality of Art* explores. On the cover, a single shoe lies abandoned on a shore, embodying its story and its journey — one the reader will be part of through this groundbreaking approach.

In her research, Vidal Claramonte follows the path laid out by other scholars who departed from traditional language-based Translation Studies, in order to engage with a more expansive vision that incorporates materiality. Drawing on Bassnett's and Johnston's (2019) outward turn, the approach to multimodality proposed by Boria *et al.* (2020), Littau's (2016) material turn, as well as the concepts of "tangible translation" (Ciribuco and O'Connor, 2022) and "ubiquitous translation" (Blumczynski, 2016), this monograph examines how material and non-linguistic elements —such as objects, sounds and smells— can be sources of emotions, thereby becoming sources of translatable meaning in the context of displacement.

Throughout its five chapters, this book illustrates the significance of materiality in Translation Studies. The introductory chapter begins with the premise that translation permeates all sites and aspects of life. For migrants in particular, translation takes on a political dimension, functioning as a way of life, as they travel with objects that "translate silenced histories and thus bring to light emotions" (p. 2). Translation incorporates different semiotic systems beyond the linguistic, and therefore materiality is an essential medium for creating meaning that can be translated through the five senses.

In the experience of displacement, everyday objects hold memories and emotions, bringing the past into the new home. Although the meanings of these objects may shift

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during the journey and merge into a hybrid space, they remain connected to their original culture and embody the journey undertaken, serving as emotional and mnemonic bridges for their owners. The chapter also highlights the importance of *translatio*, which involves physical movement, and *translationality*: “a dynamic process that brings to light the entanglements of matter and meaning, space and time” (p. 6). Under this enlightening perspective, translation always carries a transformation.

In the second chapter, the reader is invited to delve into the notion of *translatio* as a journey, as “both translation and traveling deal with the creation and deconstruction of representations that occupy a very important place in the construction and maintenance or destabilization of the political and cultural hierarchies” (p. 21). Displacement is not limited to geographical movement, but it also occurs between semiotic systems, in an intertwined process. As migrants flee wars or disasters, they carry their past and their voices —subaltern voices that are brought to life through the rewriting of past narratives—, encountering new experiences and challenges along their path. This view positions the migrant experience as inherently linked to the translation and displacement of stories. Migrants must translate themselves as they leave their homelands, confronting new realities that extend beyond language to new scenarios and contexts. The movement between territories involves changes that result in a rewriting of places: as people are displaced, spaces are reinterpreted, emphasizing that meaning, like migrants, is perpetually in transit.

The third chapter introduces an innovative phenomenological approach as it analyzes the concept of translationality within migrant objects. The researcher emphasizes the storytelling and communicative qualities inherent in the objects migrants carry —often taken hastily and amidst deep uncertainty about their future—, as well as those left behind or lost. Shoes, religious items, pets (among countless other objects) undergo relocation and readapt the meanings they convey. Photographs, due to their portability, serve as unique examples: they act as visual translators of moments, spaces, pains, and various other conditions.

Although migrant objects may stress the *otherness* of their owners, they also offer future generations a tangible link to their ancestors and embody their journeys. Vidal Claramonte points out that “migrants are bodies in constant translation, nomadic bodies that are themselves translations, since time, space, and materiality are in their case habitats of translation” (p. 72). The chapter draws on a variety of literary works for children and adults, as well as installations and artworks where all senses may participate, to explore how migrant objects raise questions about their owners’ stories and the ever-shifting meanings that migrate with them.

Chapter four is a thorough, simulating examination of the literature and particularly the visual arts that represent displaced objects, connecting them to *translationality* as a moving and transformative process. Vidal Claramonte studies various exhibitions that feature objects as central storytellers, evoking emotions and preserving the memory of historical events, such as those found in Holocaust museums or refugee-focused displays.

Boats carry great significance in human displacement, and Vidal Claramonte analyzes the example of Christoph Büchel's *Barca Nostra*, a ship exhibited at the 2019 Venice Biennale. This vessel has a dynamic history —it began as a fishing boat, then became an illegal means of transport for migrants, evidence of crime and tragedy, and finally an art piece. Nevertheless, the translation of this particular object failed to communicate the voices of the migrants who perished on board (Simon and Polezzi, 2022). Through this and other examples, we come to understand the importance of approaching the exhibitions of migrant objects from a critical perspective. In order to become *translatio*, objects must authentically convey the voices of displaced individuals, the subalterns, whose stories were once silenced but can be retold through these items. It is equally crucial to question the whole context of translation involving both the translator and the audience who receives it: "Retelling tales through *translatio* encourages us to question received stories in a world where translation permeates all spheres and where we are all translated beings, agents of translation, with a view to bringing all stories to light" (p. 118). Such translations are experiential, following the concept of Campbell and Vidal (2024), because they move emotions more profoundly than intellect or language.

The final chapter is titled '*Terra infirma*', which refers to an infirm, unstable earth, symbolizing the migrants' ever-in-transit identity. It raises awareness of current migratory issues, exploring how a life built on constant *translatio* shapes identity. In an era marked by conflicts and a globalized world increasingly defined by physical and metaphorical walls that restrict diversity, translation assumes a pivotal role: it gives voice to the silenced and displaced, expanding its influence through materiality and emotions, and engaging with art to create new spaces where diverse narratives can be shared. Understanding objects through their translationality becomes a powerful tool to denounce the loss, injustice, and death that displaced people endure on their journeys, where sometimes only objects remain to share their stories and preserve their memories.

By examining a wide array of artists' and activists' works throughout the book, Vidal Claramonte compellingly illustrates that translation is everywhere, requiring society — translators and audience alike — to pay attention to the stories and memories migrant objects can communicate, while always questioning the experiential, tangible, and sensorial perspective from which these stories are told.

In conclusion, this fascinating book delves into the ethical translation issues involved in understanding contemporary artworks through translationality and *translatio*. Vidal Claramonte convincingly argues that it is crucial for Translation Studies to embrace philosophical, political, anthropological, and sociological approaches, moving beyond its traditional linguistic boundaries. *Translation and Objects* is thought-provoking, challenging, deeply evocative and emotionally resonant... much like embarking on a journey.

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