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# Singular Travels: Microhistory as a Museology of Migration

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In recent decades, working-class and subaltern cultures and experiences have finally begun to permeate the heritage world, both within established museums and as part of new, distinct institutions (Rasse 2017, 280).

Although out-numbered and outsized by the museums of the superordinate culture, there continue to emerge museum initiatives in the contemporary period that reflect the world-views of cultures or peoples who have been marginalized or suppressed by the dominant social and political forces (Coffee 2006, 444).

Museums big and small have responded, albeit to varying degrees, to higher expectations in terms of their educational, political, and social involvement in society. This *engagement* relies on a growing theoretical apparatus, which has led to redefining the very notion of the museum (Marstine et al. 2013). In rethinking the museum, the three “spheres of the sensitive,” as François Mairesse puts it, are increasingly intertwined: nature, aesthetics, and society (Mairesse 2018, 13).

Migration offers a case in point. As it came to occupy the forefront of Western politics in the 1990s, the heritage world reacted with a newfound interest in the question propagated by academics, artists, and curators. Led by the growing number of specialised institutions, museums started to “de-marginalise” migration (Pelsmaekers/Van Hout 2020). To this day, their common denominator is an attempt to generate empathetic experiences and counter the pervasive prejudices against people on the move. In that regard, the role of curatorial research has been hailed as essential, all the more so when it can help debunk prevalent historical myths by focusing on the itineraries of particular objects (Saphinaz-Amal 2013; Ingemann Parby 2016). When it comes to enhancing the relatability of migration stories, the value of singular narratives and first-person voices has also been acknowledged (McFadzean 2019).

Still, displaying migration at the museum is no easy task. It requires “the development of new exhibition and display settings supporting innovative practices and programmes” (Lanz 2016, 179). Such innovations remain rare. This contribution is meant to provide food for thought in this respect. It does so through the prism of one particular approach to displaying

migration experiences, which combines migration objects and migration stories. The intent is to show how objects of migration can play an important role in exhibition strategies that put singular stories at the center of the museography. Written from a historian's perspective, this text does not primarily aim at engaging with the growing scholarship, whether theoretical or practical, that deals with migration from a curatorial perspective. Rather, it is meant to situate the microhistory of migration in its intellectual context and highlight its heuristic potential for both the historian and the curator (1). It then delves into an exhibition taking place in Aubervilliers, France, from October 2021 to June 2022, which I am co-curating along with an organization called *Association pour un musée du logement populaire*.<sup>1</sup> This exhibition's historical narrative aims at entangling, and rendering visible, questions of class and migration through the stories of former inhabitants of one particular public housing unit (2).

## **1. Microhistory as a device to display migration stories**

### *Microhistory of migration: a growing historiographical trend*

The history of modern migrations has long relied on the macro level of analysis. Microhistorical approaches, whose early success in the 1970s and 1980s came from their capacity to highlight “the individuality of persons. [...] as agents of historical change” (Iggers 2005, 112) were initially neglected by migration scholars. There were various reasons for this. From a theoretical standpoint, specialists of modern displacements initially mistook micro methods, championed by students of the Medieval and Early Modern period, for a *pis aller* meant to make up for the impracticality of a macro analysis due to a lack of sources. Then the transnational turn, with its emphasis on global, connected, or shared history, appeared to call for panoramic landscapes rather than detailed close-ups. The relative disinterest for singular narratives was also due to political and ideological factors. Starting in the 1960s, the torchbearers of migration history had shared the emancipatory, countercultural concerns of the New Social History and its efforts to ‘historicise ordinary people’. They were less concerned with individual experiences than with the broad historical picture and its perceived unfairness towards immigrants in general — or at least ethnic groups. Individuals were all the less appealing since sources documenting singular itineraries seemed to be the preserve of socially dominant, educated elites.

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<sup>1</sup> “Association for a museum of working-class housing.” For more information on the organization and the exhibition, see [www.amulop.org](http://www.amulop.org) and [www.laviehlm-expo.com](http://www.laviehlm-expo.com)

Around the turn of the 21st century, however, scholars started to realise that stressing the agency of individuals could, in fact, advance their historiographic agenda. It could at once fend off capitalist and nationalist teleologies and keep readers engaged by telling complex life stories they could relate to (Gregory 1999). In contrast to the Annales' paradigms, which emphasised structures and macroscopic forces, microhistorical approaches stayed clear of wide-ranging explanations of historical phenomena, focusing instead on particular cases scrutinised on their own terms. In the context of post-structuralism starting in the 1990s, such study of individual trajectories was also credited with avoiding, or at least controlling for, the perils of taking ethnic, national, racial, or gender groupness for granted (Zalc/Mariot 2010). In recent years, more and more historians of migration have tried their luck at the microscope.

An important factor in that shift of fortunes is that technical and logistical conditions have become more favorable to inquiries at the micro level. Early attempts at microhistory had mostly been based on serendipitous discoveries of document 'treasure troves' — judicial records, diaries, correspondences — containing unusually rich information. New digital tools and databases, including privately-funded genealogy depositories, are now making it easier to track specific people and families. Although they still account for a minority of historical studies about migration, microhistories are now an increasingly popular subgenre of the scholarly literature on the topic. Yet such accounts largely remain absent from heritage institutions.

### *Migration museums and their grand narratives*

Museums or exhibitions about migrations have appeared in growing numbers since the 1990s and have often been commissioned or supported by national authorities. As such, their underlying objective was to expand the inclusiveness of the national narratives, not to question the national framework or its analytical relevance (Baur 2017). By relating the integration of immigrants or the dispersal of emigrants across the world, the idea is often to underscore an overlooked, positive trait of the nation, rebranded as an assimilationist success (Gordon-Walker 2016) or a globally influential polity (Wang 2020). The many categories of people and complex stories that do not fit this picture are often left in the shadows — small ethnic groups, non-assimilated migrants, returnees, expellees, internal migrants, colonial subjects, Romani People, traveller populations, and recent immigrant communities, to name only a few (Blickstein 2009; Sutherland 2014; Bounia 2016).

At times, the liberties taken by institutions with the broader historical record have been too blatant to go unnoticed, resulting in significant public debate. In France, the rocky start of the National Museum of Immigration History was largely related to its failure of engaging with the country's colonial past, despite being located in a pavilion from the notorious 1931 Colonial Exhibition (Delaplace 2015). Recently, the long-awaited effort to reform the museum's permanent exhibition fell short of expectations (Bertrand/Boucheron 2019). In particular, it did not put into question several mainstays of the dominant, nation-based approaches to migration in museums: a) the essentialism of the nation as the ultimate frame of reference; b) the strong teleology of assimilation of immigrants, and the belief in the overall progress of their treatment over time; c) the hypertrophy of politico-legal turning points. The process to rethink this exhibition was also striking in its scant attention to museum design. The role of artifact selection, contextualization, and display cannot be a mere afterthought.

### *Objects and artifacts in migration museums*

In museum displays about migration, objects are typically used for their iconic, evocative power. From Ellis Island to Genoa, from Dublin to São Paulo, old suitcases, worn-out wallets, and over-stamped passports have become a curatorial trope. Selected for their semiotic rather than their aesthetic or historic value, they are integrated into the museum design insofar as they can convey a dramatic effect. The point is not to elicit empathy with “the feelings of those who originally held the objects, cherished them, collected them, possessed them” (Greenblatt 1991, 45), but rather to illustrate, introduce, or visually underscore a macro-narrative that is driven independently from the objects' history and agency.

Objects identified in their singularity and connected to the personal story of one or more migrant people are exhibited much less frequently. When curators do intertwine these dimensions, the effect of identification and relatability seems particularly high (Witcomb 2010). But there is still limited appetite for microhistorically loaded, narrative-laden artifacts, especially in social history museums. It is true that in general, these institutions have only a vague knowledge of the ownership history and spatial itinerary of their material possessions, which have not been acquired for their historical and narrative content.

In contrast to mainstream museographies of migration, the choice of a microhistorical and micromaterial focus — understood here as a reliance on objects as carriers of singular narratives — is meant to generate two related benefits: a non-prototypical reconstruction of

people's itineraries and life courses, in which their perspective occupies center stage and a more immersive/empathetic experience.

## 2. Singular stories through singular objects: the example from an exhibition in France

### *Articulate stories and objects in the domestic space*

House museums are peculiar heritage sites. They distinguish themselves from other places of public memory by offering a more immersive experience with the past and its present legacies (Hodge/Beranek 2011). Those that tell the stories of ordinary people are rare, despite a strong public interest in the intimate experiences of the lower classes alongside elites. One museum that fits the profile is the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York. Founded in 1988 as a result of a grassroots initiative, this pioneering institution built its success around a radically innovative project. It set out to share the authentic stories of the building's former occupants *in situ*, in the unassuming places they inhabited. In the words of its co-founder Ruth Abram,

the most important thing in terms of authenticity is that the museum is telling actual stories of people who actually lived in the building... We're not talking about this room and that table and this vase; you can't do that with poor people. They had to be measured by the content of their dreams, not the content of their apartment (quoted in Berlinger 2018, 24).

This approach has inspired a few other institutions around the world (see for example the Susannah Place museum in Sydney, described in Cossu 2008). In France, no such museum exists. Museums in and about working-class neighborhoods, such as the *Musée urbain de Suresnes* near Paris or the *Musée urbain Tony-Garnier* in Lyon, typically center on urbanistic choices, demographic archetypes, and typical interiors, not the histories of actual families. In that sense, they do little to fend off some of the stereotypes and stigma associated with the sprawling, lower-class areas called *banlieues*. These urban areas have become a synonym for everything wrong with contemporary France: unemployment, unassimilable migrant communities, youth violence, anti-Semitism, and radical Islam. The objective of the *Association pour un musée du logement* — subsidize is precisely to counter those prejudiced simplifications by offering a closer, more human glimpse into the complex realities of those diverse neighborhoods.

The first major step on a journey that should lead to a brick-and-mortar museum by the decade's end is a temporary exhibition. This event takes place in a 'cité HLM' (for example a complex of — subsidized housing) erected in the 1950s a few blocks outside Paris.

## *The exhibition*

Entitled *La vie HLM*, the exhibition takes visitors on time travels. It delves into the lives of several families across multiple decades, from the 1950s to the 2000s in different apartments. The stories are based on microhistorical research, conducted through archival work and interviews. In two separate but identical 51-square-meter two-bedroom apartments, 45-minute guided tours allow visitors to get acquainted with families who resided there for years.

In the first apartment, the narrative centers on one family with Polish roots, whose long-standing presence in the building resulted in vast networks of solidarity. The visit's screenplay, so to speak, consists in having visitors spend a day with the family in 1967, about ten years after its arrival in the complex, and choose which of the five family members they want to follow. The aim is to raise awareness about each of the characters' background, constraints, and agency, right before the occurrence of a major (micro) event — the father's sudden death — that will alter the trajectory of the family. Prompted by the guide and through their own explorations, visitors are able to understand in the most intimate way how the family negotiated that turning point.

In the second apartment, the focus is on the domestic setting itself. The narrative connects three different families that lived here successively, each one having a slice of their experiences recounted in one room of the apartment. This display allows for a depiction of three occupational profiles, three ways of getting access to public housing, and three migration waves — internal, European, postcolonial. Moreover, the families are captured at three important moments in the macro history of France, Paris, or its suburbs. This does not mean that the families in question partook in, or even knew about, the events or major evolutions going on at the macro level. Rather, potential absences, silences, and lacunae are acknowledged and used as heuristic tools to question how, why, and when those specific people would decide to take part in larger movements.

Throughout the unfolding of those family narratives, a number of historical themes crop up. They include but are not limited to: the evolutions of comfort, hygiene, cultural practices, consumption, and leisure; intimacy, relationships between genders and generations, life rhythms; political behaviors, economic crises, pollution, and even occupational diseases. Hardship and challenges are depicted in no uncertain terms, while audiovisual excerpts also present positive recollections narrated by the former inhabitants themselves. Towards the end of the visit, guides encourage visitors to reflect on issues of memory and distortion, and to

discuss the common belief that ‘things used to be better’. This opportunity for critical analysis, as well as insights into the historian’s toolkit, contributes to a ‘participatory microhistory’ in which visitors are invited to partake in the interpretation and representation of the past (Hammett et al. 2020). In addition, a key feature of this particular exhibition is that the tour guides themselves hail from the *banlieues* and have been able to incorporate allusions to their own personal experiences into the tours’ script.

### *Microhistorical musealia*

Objects play a key role in the *La vie HLM* exhibition. Two types of artifacts are common sights in historical exhibitions. First, the evocative ones — pieces of furniture, utensils, toys, clothing items — are meant to immediately immerse visitors in a particular era and social setting. They have been chosen to match as closely as possible the information available from archival sources including a vast repository of photographs extensively documenting the *cité*’s interiors in the mid-1980s as well from the families’ own recollections. Those objects are secondary, however, and do not feature as such in the story. The second category is archival documents, whether generic for example TV and radio clips or specific to the protagonists’ lives letters exchanged with institutions, commercial invoices, salary slips. Only a fraction of this material is exploited in the scenography, the rest being stored away and kept out of view in drawers, cupboards, and behind wall coverings. Visitors are invited to access these objects at the end of each tour as a form of supplementary material, as they can roam freely around the apartment.

The third category of objects is the more visible and important one. They could be called deep artifacts: they have a rich history of their own and have performed multiple functions in the families’ lives. Their scenographic role is to enhance the visitors’ microhistorical knowledge and provide a tangible feel to past experiences by conveying the “visceral in the visual” (Pink et al. 2010). An example among others: a crystal chandelier, which remained in one of the families for generations. Beyond its basic use as a light source, it acquired several layers of meaning over time. Crafted by the family’s father as part of his work at the famous Baccarat company as a bronze caster, the chandelier became an object of pride and fascination. It carried an unmistakable measure of luxury that was at odds with the family’s modest means and otherwise lackluster way of life. Later on, it came to concentrate the memories of a bygone, happy era; its bronze parts even conjured painful images of disease and death. The chandelier then vanished out of view, changed hands in the extended family, moved regions, then reappeared and returned to its primary hanging spot — or at least the illusion of it. A good slice



of the family history is being told through the prism of that object which was used, loved, and longed for by real people, making it a great vehicle for the micro-storytelling at play in the exhibition. In that sense, displacement is embedded in the object itself. Mediated and enacted by the singular stories of migration and the working-class experience it takes part in, the micro-materiality of the artifact places it at the center of the production of historical meaning.

It is about time we devote time and resources to tell the history, in an embodied and relatable way, of immigrants and the urban working class in France in the 20th century. One exhibition in France — and the museum it paves the way for — offers an intimate and immersive museum design precisely tailored to that effort. Largely inspired by the New York Tenement Museum, the display is based on microhistorical investigations and adapted into a participatory and inclusive visit format. One of its singularities resides in the emphasis placed on ‘deep artifacts’ whose own migrations — both in space and people’s cognitive and sentimental geographies — structure and support the entire narrative.

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