Imaginary Objects, Imaginary Palestine: Exploring Methodological Challenges and Opportunities in Ethnographic Research in the Context of the Nahr El-Bared Refugee Camp

FABIANO SARTORI
MBONGENI NGULUBE

Abstract

This paper discusses methodological challenges in the inductive study of forced displacement. It focuses on fieldwork experience, ethnographic limitations, and unresolved ethical and empathy dilemmas. Through an analysis of a previous study which nuanced refugee coping strategies in facing transience and chronic uncertainty; the study, set at Nahr el-Bared, a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, revealed that small portable personal objects were the main depository of memory, coping and hope for a future return to Palestine. These objects, (some brought from Palestine 70 years prior) were revealed to poses the power to recreate a connection to the Palestinian identity and an imagined Palestine. The 2007 war relegated most small objects into memory, thus ‘things in motion’ becomes the crux of the argument. Methodological limitation is revealed in studying ‘imagined objects’ drawing on ‘thing theory’ and Appadurai’s methodological fetishism as a possible pathway.

Keywords

Methodological Fetishism, Imagined Objects, Ethnographic Moment

Introduction

There has been a re-emergence of scholarly and popular media interest in migration and forced displacement in recent years, incited by events such as the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. In its

1 Fabiano Sartori is an architect and urban planner, with Masters in Sustainable Environmental Rehabilitation in Architecture and Urbanism; Environmental Management (Brazil); and International Cooperation in Sustainable Emergency Architecture (Spain). He has 14 years of experience in both private and public sectors, as an entrepreneur, and in the humanitarian field. His portfolio includes projects and research developed on sustainable building design, environmental management, urban resilience, and forced displacement. He currently works as an Environmental Field Adviser for UNHCR Brazil, deployed for the emergency response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis in coordination with the UNEP Conflicts and Disasters Unit (LAC).

2 Mbongeni Ngulube is an anthropology researcher in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. His current work focuses on land (tenure), identity, exchange, and the migration-development nexus (‘pre and post’ emergency). Ngulube is a Mundus Urbano Scholar under the EU’s Excellency Program and has lectured at universities in Belgium, Germany, France and Spain; currently in the Masters of International Cooperation, Sustainable Emergency architecture at Univesitat Internacional de Catalunya. Ngulube has a background in Urbanism, holds three masters in: Architecture, Urban Development, and Housing; and has doctoral works in Social, Cultural, and Development Anthropology.
latest incarnation, forced migration has shaken the very foundations of national sovereignty and challenged the European idea of citizenship.\textsuperscript{3} In the Mediterranean it has been called the greatest humanitarian disaster in the region since World War II. \textsuperscript{4} Though forced migration is historical, with today’s version rooted in the breakup of empires at the end of the First World War and post WWII nation building,\textsuperscript{5} recent discourse associated with current incidences of forced migration shows a reverse in causality. In the past, nation building caused forced migration, but today nation states and citizenship are challenged by forced migration and displacement.\textsuperscript{6} These developments have shone a renewed focus and understanding on forced migration and refugee camps, both recent, like Moria in Greece, and protracted, such as Nahr el-Bared in Lebanon. This shift in discourse opens opportunities to see forced migration as more than a challenge to policy but a way of human mobility and livelihood. Such life worlds nuance our notions of the nature of nationhood, citizenship, belonging and identity in the twenty-first century.

The change in discourse and perception of forced migration is accompanied by methodological challenges. The nature of the subject requires an inductive approach such as ethnography, in which the researcher participates and observes the mundane, everyday lifeworld of the informants in search of insight. Scholars such as Run advocate auto-ethnography,\textsuperscript{7} where the researcher is a member of the studied group and provides insight based on self-observation and experience; such opportunities are limited since few refugees are anthropologists. Ethnography is both a “doing” and a “writing,” it is not just Geertz’s “thick description” in the written artefact,\textsuperscript{8} it is first an immersion in the field.\textsuperscript{9} It is also both a method and genre,\textsuperscript{10} privileging lived experience. In fact, social knowledge is always an ethical problematic and the ethical and the empirical in ethnography calls for the development of new methods,\textsuperscript{11} as such, each ethnography reinvents aspects of known practice. For example, Malinowski’s work turned scientists shut away in libraries and museums into explorers, tore them from books and threw them into life,\textsuperscript{12} while the reflexive turn questioned whether ethnographies are artifacts of the researcher’s presence,\textsuperscript{13} and afforded researchers the opportunity for confession and catharsis,\textsuperscript{14} by revealing their positions and influence in the field. But, as Spivak states, making positions transparent does not make them unproblematic.\textsuperscript{15} This paper analyzes a previous narrative study completed by the author and supervised by


5 Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee, eds., \textit{Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century} (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

6 Stokholm, \textit{The Mediterranean Migrant Crisis}.


15 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, cited in Pillow, "Confession, Catharsis, or Cure?"
Professor Mbongeni Ngulube, who co-authored this paper. The study, which applied an ethnographic methodology and utilized a narrative approach, is based on a six-month-long piece of research, which took place from November 2017 to May 2018, including fieldwork at Nahr el-Bared, a Palestinian refugee camp established in 1948 in the north of Lebanon.

The structure of this paper is intended to demonstrate methodological challenges associated with ethnographic research in forced migration. It also employs a study of small objects as a mechanism of coping with transience, which will form the primary empirical pathway. The study shows that after seven decades, refugees are still in a state of transience. It further reveals that small objects from Palestine were the main depository of memory and the primary means of transcending the chronic uncertainty of camp life.

In the first section of this paper, the camp will be described through experiences of field access negotiation. Then the ethnographic moment is discussed, which revealed the meaning(s) imbued in small objects from Palestine. However, since many of these objects were lost in the 2007 war, informants spoke of imaginary objects, which further represent an imagined territory of the Palestine they left decades ago. The paper thus poses the methodological challenge of researching imagined objects and imagined territories, wherein Appadurai’s methodological fetishism is suggested. The fieldwork resulted in twenty-five semi-structured interviews, conducted in two main groups of actors: eighteen Palestinian refugees and seven other stakeholders including representatives of the Lebanese Government, UNRWA and local NGOs (seventeen men and eight women). Informal interactions with at least twenty people, including Palestinian refugees from Nahr el-Bared (fifteen men), and Lebanese people from Tripoli (five men) also inform the findings discussed here. These interactions occurred both inside of the camp and in Tripoli, on the streets, at cafes, shawarma shops, a Mosque, and the Old Souk, among other places. As detailed below, due to matters of trust and the nature of the camp, snowball sampling was employed and, consequently, a gender balance was difficult to achieve. Individuals named in this paper have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

The Cold River

Lebanon is one of the largest host nations for Palestinian refugees. Approximately 450,000 refugees are located in twelve official camps, and their informal expansions, two of which are in militarized zones. Nahr el-Bared, which literally translates to “The Cold River” in standard Arabic, is located sixteen kilometres from Tripoli, north of the country, near a river whose name it bears. Nahr el-Bared was established in 1948 by the League of the Red Crescent in response to the 750,000 Palestinians (80 percent of the population) displaced in the newly established nation of Israel. This expulsion and dislocation, known as the Nakba, can be translated to “exodus” according to some sources, but Palestinians insisted that Nakba means “the catastrophe.” Over nearly six decades, the camp evolved from a tent city to an urban setting of dual morphology, an inner camp established by UNRWA and a “grey area” into which the camp has spilled over the years. Nahr el-Bared urbanized primarily through the efforts of the

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16 Strathern, Property, Substance, and Effect.
refugees. My informant Fauzi, a twenty-three year-old man born and raised in the camp, declared, “This is not a camp, this is a city! My city!”

The refugee camps in Lebanon are, in general, accustomed to receiving foreigners like journalists, researchers and aid workers. Prior to my arrival, I had obtained a university letter detailing my identity and the nature of my research as part of informed consent, which I included in my application package to access the camp. I set myself up at a Monastery in the La Mina, Tripoli, while I touched base with the contacts I had communicated with prior to my arrival. Aishah, the leader of a community-based organization, initiated the application for my access to the camp along with “Sounds of Change,” a Dutch NGO that frequently works in Middle Eastern refugee camps, all to be processed by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). This supposedly routine application met stiff resistance from the military, which first remained silent on the applications, and later denied both. Sounds of Change had to reschedule and relocate the children’s workshop to Beddawi Refugee Camp, a non-militarized zone.

Left without a choice I approached Fadila, the Head of Design at UNRWA, believing that the UN had better clout and would resolve the issue. To our surprise, the LAF would not relent, and we suspected that there must have been a change regarding access protocol. As time went by, I became frustrated; I felt powerless for the first half of my fieldwork period. It was difficult to come to terms with the reality that every contact I had, including those at the UN, could not secure my access into the camp. I had already exhausted all my resources without results and I still had not been to the camp. I reached out to my supervisor who assured me that “even lack of access to the camp is data too.” In the meantime, I managed to interview four Palestinian refugees in Tripoli; this is how I met Fauzi and two critical contacts, Hasan and Fajar, who later hosted me in their homes in the camp and helped with the translation of data and connected me with further contacts.

After waiting for sixteen days, my application was approved by the military and a contact organized by an alumnus of my study programme accepted my request and kindly drove me to the Abdeh Checkpoint, one of five in Nahr el-Bared, and explained my situation to the LAF soldier on duty, who then denied my entry. It was in this desperate moment that I called one of my Tripoli interviewees, Fauzi, who rushed to meet me at the checkpoint. Fauzi spoke in a very different way with the soldier, I could tell he had “developed a capacity to perform the role of ‘the refugee’ with the accompanying stereotypes that it entails.” He made his points without insisting, was persuasive without commanding, and generally took a humbler approach. It turns out, there is a cabinet at the checkpoint where hundreds of authorization documents are stored. Fauzi, being used to the LAF, managed to manoeuvre the soldier into checking the cabinet until my name was found, a process that took twenty minutes. The soldier checked my credentials and retained my passport while I finally entered “the field.” This became the routine, each time I entered, I surrendered my passport and in a real way, I felt I had stepped into a new country, I finally arrived in Palestine.

My short struggle for research access demonstrates the extreme control exerted by the LAF who dictate the daily existence of the camp inhabitants. The lack of freedom of movement, a basic human right, symbolically expresses what Ramadan calls a State of Exception. Nahr el-Bared exists within Lebanon but is not governed by Lebanon, it is outside of the national order and operates as an excluded State; as such, social rights are suspended and ceded to military rule. The LAF control in essence, is the material/physical expression of lives under control in multiple forms, from prevention of land ownership, to access to job opportunities at

the Government. The sketch also describes the tenuous relationships between the army, international organizations, local NGOs, the Lebanese population and Palestinian refugees. The LAF’s control on access and security gives the camp the appearance of an unrecognized state, complete with passport control. Everyday life in the camp is regimented by an interplay of these amorphous relationships which disempowers refugees most of all leaving them in a state of limbo. This “frame of liminality” is often invoked as a metaphor for considering how refugees are people outside the “national order of things.”\(^2\) They lack the rights associated with nationhood and citizenship, as Muhammad, a family patriarch, and a community leader, lamented during one of our dinners together at his home, “I’m an old man and I have to present my identity to enter my own home. This is a camp, my camp, not a prison. There is no humanity!” While refugees occupy very different types of settlements from tent cities to integrated urban dwellings, this “camp logic” of permanent temporariness defines their shared experience. The uncertainty I experienced for a short time with the LAF is the everyday experience of the refugees. Uncertainty is often defined as an inability to know what the future will hold,\(^2\) and in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, chronic uncertainty is the norm.\(^2\)

Refugees often have to manage seemingly endless uncertainties that stem directly from their refugee status, somewhat irrespective of where they reside.\(^2\)\(^5\) For Palestinians, it’s a case of uncertainty within uncertainty, internal factions in the camp, threats from outside the camp, LAF, lack of governance, and decades of drawn-out conflict in Palestine, plus the recent influx of new arrivals from Syria, some former Palestinians.\(^2\)\(^6\) Additionally, Palestinians deal with a very specific forced displacement characteristic. For the past seven decades, the State of Israel has been gaining ground, physically expanding its territory while, more recently, the support of important stakeholders in the international arena has increased. This context makes it impossible to return home in the immediate future. Unlike refugees from different origins, home no longer exists for Palestinians, and the move to a third territory seems improbable after seven decades, deepening the sense of permanent temporariness.

The interviews I carried out in Tripoli while awaiting access to the camp suggested that Palestinians greatly valued their identity, which their isolation in the camp had helped to preserve as it limited their assimilation into the local population. This perception results from a combination of their expressed frustration of not being fully integrated locally, and the necessity of converting the camp into Palestinian territory, characterized by the community's manifestations; an additional mechanism in their fight to regain the original Palestinian territory. The urban environment developed over decades was infused with symbols and deep meaning which I believed created a sense of home.

Everywhere you look, you see Palestine. We do many paintings on the walls, we spread our flag, it is all there. The camp does not let you forget that you are in Palestine, and makes us remember home, all the time,
is the way Fauzi explained it in Tripoli. Once in the camp however, I saw a few flag paintings here and there but most of them looked quite old and neglected. My informants also frequently described their settlement as a city but at times insisted it was a camp as was the case for Fauzi


\(^{24}\) Afifi, Callejas, Shahnazi, White, and Nimah, “The Functionality of Communal Coping”

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
and Muhammad respectively. In one sense they deployed the “city identity” to claim control over their territory, and the “camp identity” as a sign that they have another home they wish to return to. I later discovered that the expected visual representations of Palestine were not as frequent nor relevant, and some were the product of NGO activities or faction campaigns and publicity. I could not recognize the Palestine I had imagined based on Fauzi’s words. This debunked my initial impression of collective communal coping through urban space, until I met Ahmad, the man who gave me a completely new perspective on the material expression of culture.

The State of Exception

As he came out of a narrow, dense and poorly illuminated shop, the sun-lit Ahmad was a man of around seventy-five years and visibly tired. His battered teeth, unshaven beard, red eyes, and dark circles intensified a sense of suffering. A father of ten, Ahmad has been living in a terrible condition in one of UNRWA emergency shelter containers for the past eleven years. With vivid detail, he described the challenge of taking care of his family in such a difficult environment, marked by insufficient public services and reduced post-war economic activity. “I am working every single day to pay the rent off this shop. I almost hardly bring anything home. I do not know what to do.” Tears welled in his eyes as he narrated his second war-induced displacement. He spoke of a “second Nakba” in 2007 when the LAF invaded the camp supposedly in response to the armed radical group Fatah Al-Islam. It resembled 1948 when Palestinians were informed of an Israeli invasion and instructed to evacuate and carry nothing as they would return shortly. Ahmad explained that in 2007 the authorities sounded a very similar evacuation notice, assuring them that they would return in three days. He closed the door to his house taking nothing but the clothes on his back, only to return after months at the end of the war to find his house devastated, as he stated below,

When I came back to my home, everything was destroyed. I tried, but I could not find a single thing. I lost everything, all my memories, my history. I lost the key of my home in Palestine. I was keeping this key for 70 years! I lost my hope to come back to Palestine! I lost everything that could represent Palestine for me. Life just does not make sense anymore. I am just struggling to survive.

He recalled his return painfully to me. At this moment, I encountered what Strathern calls the ethnographic moment, “a moment of immersement that is simultaneously total and partial.” An encounter that unlocks the research, almost literally in this case, demonstrating that ethnography comprises a double field, each creating the other – the informant’s lifeworld and the ethnographer’s theoretical frame, and he must inhabit both fields at once. This dual habitus was a moment of deep despair for him, and paradoxically a triumph for my research, as it revealed a new analytical frame and perspective but caused a yet unresolved ethical and empathy dilemma. The limits between the necessity of accessing information and the right of impelling suffering through this memory process represents a dilemma in ethnographic research. Through witnessing his tears, I realized the symbolic power of small portable objects as the depository of memory and meaning, and as a means for containing hope for the future. I then realized that other informants had previously discussed a similar loss of hopes imbued in small objects.

27 Strathern, Property, Substance, and Effect.
Farrah, the founder and leader of a local NGO, is a strong young lady with long grey hair, and a compulsive smoker. In her hoarse voice, she exclaimed,

I lost all my memories in the 2007 war. For the past ten years, I have been ‘collecting’ objects that make me remember Palestine, from sculptures to paintings, from wood boxes to plates, even souvenirs, to restore my library of memories.

Hafidz, a talkative, playful and extremely affectionate young architect told me “come with me, I wanna show you something important.” With a beautiful sunset backdrop, he led me to an old destroyed concrete slab and said “welcome to my home! And sorry for not being able to offer you a cup of tea.” This was the ruins of his house, destroyed during the 2007 war. With passion, he spoke of evenings with the family on the balcony, chatting, smoking nargile, sharing food, and enjoying the view. I had been struck speechless even then, feeling lost and privileged; we stood in silence for a while, then Hafidz declared:

After so many years, I do not feel so bad coming here anymore. Nowadays, it is just concrete. But when I was 15, coming back for the first time, was really hard, really sad. I took a piece of concrete and saved it to remember my home. What would make me really happy would be the removal of these rubble, because I am sure that my memories are down there! I would love to retrieve my childhood photos. I have nothing to remember that time. When we have nothing to remember our history, we feel as if our past does not exist.

The experience of displacement, being settled in a sterile space in a new territory and labelled as a refugee, is a process of depersonalization and deterritorialization. In forced displacement situations, people often make choices about what to bring with them based on primary necessities (survival and mercantile exchange), but also based on the objects that can represent them, supporting identity constructions through memory and material expressions of culture, enabling displaced individuals to recognise themselves in a new territory. For most of my informants, these small objects are imbued with a past and a hope for the future; in this way, the refugees are coping with transience.

Other scholars of forced migration have recently begun to consider how temporality might be crucial to an understanding of displacement. Horst and Grabska use the term “protracted uncertainty” to describe feeling “stuck” between places and in between past and possible future lives, with the sense that a resolution is out of their hands. It is precisely this loss of control that underpins the refugee experience and also why small portable objects are a way of regaining some semblance of hope and identity. These are by design (as observed in fieldwork) individual coping mechanisms. Though there is a collective sense about “objects,” I did not encounter an object that was shared, by members of a family, for example. As opposed to Lyons et al., who focus on communal coping which occurs when dyads or a group of people

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view a problem as “our problem” and “our responsibility,” in this case, objects were very personal.\textsuperscript{31}

In displacement experiences, the role of possessions is more than simply the practical items that encompass daily life. They are the familiar material elements – such as a child’s security blanket – capable of bringing comfort, supporting individuals in times of uncertainty. Moreover, as connections with the past, they work as reminders of “normal” times, maintaining the hope that the rupture is temporary, and the possibility of coming back home.\textsuperscript{32} In this sense, the 2007 war converted the small objects to “imaginary objects.” The narratives of Palestinian refugees expressing the power of these objects, the sadness of losing them and consequently the catastrophic loss of these important bridges to their lovely past, revealed an “imagined Palestine.” These objects were not only material memories; they were the tool for building their idea of Palestine, leading the discussion from objects themselves to an imagined territory constructed from their loss.

**Imagined Objects, Communities and Territories**

Fajar, an easy going 20-year-old young man with a passion for books, a deep interest in the concept of communism, and always ready for political debate, remarked: “You are Brazilian and you can go there. You can visit my country. But I, I’m a Palestinian, and I can’t go. It’s my country, but I have never been there…” I could sense the indignation in his voice and eyes. Like so many community members, Fajar was born and raised in the camp. With seven decades of history, Nahr el-Bared has generations of Palestinians who were born in Lebanon but are not citizens of Lebanon, and have never set foot in Palestine. Yet they speak passionately about their home country, which they experience through oral culture and small portable objects.

Trauma, as a form of social wound, occurred in 2007 due to the loss of many small objects during the war.\textsuperscript{33} This brought about a new phase to the objects and deeper meaning as they only remained in the imagination. Many informants spoke with great relish regarding the objects – keys of their houses in Palestine, pictures from childhood, wood boxes, decorated plates, among many other mementoes that make up the library of memories of each individual – and in particular, their dramatic loss in the second Nakba. This simultaneously allowed younger generations to identify strongly with the idea of the 1948 Nakba too, thus legitimizing their identity as Palestinians.

The objects became more powerful, moving from a “library of memories” to a condition of “lost objects” or simulacrum.\textsuperscript{34} They started to represent not only their memories of Palestine and its culture, but also their own suffering during the war. Representing the suffering of being a displaced community in a state of permanent temporariness, a state of exception, these imaginary objects are symbols of the loss of memories and cultural materials and, above all, the loss of Palestine itself. Therefore, the analysis of imaginary objects revealed vividly the existence of an imaginary Palestine – a Palestine built on memory.

Though in the humanitarian setting, the “suffering body” has become the main legitimate source of a claim,\textsuperscript{35} Coker notes that “[i]n the refugee experience, the future, present,

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\textsuperscript{33} Omar Dewachi, "When Wounds Travel," *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 2, no. 3 (2015): 61-82.


and even the past become the ‘unknown terrain’ that must be relearned. [T]his relearning occurs on the terrain of the body and is expressed through what she terms ‘illness talk.’”36 In Nahr el-Bared however, the objects were used at the level of a fetish which partly takes the place of the suffering body, almost as a shield. This demonstrates that “even in the exceptional context of a refugee camp, liminality, and its attendant uncertainties, may provide a space in which refugees negotiate political and social subjectivities and identities in which they imagine certain kinds of futures.”37 These imagined objects, communities, and territories could offer a clue to better understanding the life worlds of those living in seemingly permanent transience. This poses a methodological challenge to better grasp these “unseen phenomena.”

A Methodological Fetishism

The methodological approach and fieldwork experience outlined in this narrative demonstrate the challenges of carrying out ethnographic participant observation in general, but specifically in a refugee camp. Many researchers advocate ethnography to best understand the temporal, spatial and identity distortion resulting from the trauma of uncertainty and transience. To this end, Run seeks to adopt the auto-ethnographical methodology as the best way to approach new issues in diasporic identity research.38 Khosravi adds that auto-ethnographic accounts of illegal travel across borders of Asia and Europe exemplify how autobiographical introspection on larger issues can shed new light on old problems.39 This notwithstanding, unlike war correspondent journalists, the anthropologist is seldom witness to the full experience of forced displacement. It can be argued that, being in transition and transience, refugees are eternally in the “dis-place-ment” moment. Cabot is concerned with representing the true life of refugees,40 and argues that “ethnographers, perhaps through attempting to enact a kind of ‘cultural critique,’ often seek to stand outside dominant knowledge practices particularly when they focus on marginalized groups,”42 but eventually co-opt and mobilize the very dominant categories they seek to jettison.

Application of these concerns remains relevant in refugee studies, but the crux of the paper is the revelation of things as objects for coping with transience. A methodological approach that draws on the expertise of material culture, where the relationship between people and things is central in understanding the meaning of such objects. As we know “objects and humans inform the existence of each other; they are inextricably linked in meaning.”43 People interact with things from birth, but “normally we would understand object and human to be on two different sides of an object-subject dialectic,” as Descartes argued in his writings on the incorporeal mind so long ago.44 As anthropological data, the things in the case of Palestinian refugees transcend objectivity, or “thingness,” and thus pose the question “how do you reconstruct past systems of meaning (let alone changes in them) when you can neither

37 Malkki, “Refugees and Exile.”
38 Run, “‘Out of place?’”
40 Cabot, “Refugee Voices.”
42 Cabot, “Refugee Voices.”
44 Ibid.
participate in nor directly observe the lives of people.” Brown’s discussion of his “thing theory” argues “why not let things alone? Let them rest somewhere else – in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory.”

In other words, when things are viewed, or grasped through human understanding and theory, they are in essence fetishized. Appadurai suggests that we “follow things themselves,” in this way to understand “objects themselves, not as created and invested with meaning by humans, but as beings in their own right, quasi-objects having the quality of ‘thingness.’” For this reason, Appadurai stresses that:

Even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. No social analysis of things (whether the analyst is an economist, an art historian, or an anthropologist) can avoid a minimum level of what might be called methodological fetishism.

To follow “things in themselves” would mean subverting the subject-object dialectic in the philosophy of dualism, thus enabling a disentanglement of the human-object relationship. But

as a constitutional element of individuals where we define the things by adding values to them while the things define us – reciprocally working as agents in terms of value definition – more than the object itself, it is its trajectory the main component of its value definition.

Things in motion are thus the crux of the argument, yet in the instance of Palestinian refugees, the “things themselves” no longer exist, in a real tangible sense, having been lost in the 2007 war. The “things” exist only in the memory and are already fetishized. Fowles, drawing on Baudrillard’s definition, states: “[a]s a mirror the object is perfect, precisely because it sends back not real images, but desired ones,” which gives us a sense of how Palestinian refugees relate to their lost objects. Though it is in their traditional role, it is “through the subjectification of objects, that anthropologists seem to search for a new anthropological informant in order to occupy the space left by the disappearance or relocation of the typical anthropological informant of the colonial era;” in other words, “things.” This case study offers an opportunity to transcend methodological fetishism in the study of the imagined territory of Palestine.

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48 Button, Whales, Legs, Harpoons, and Other Things.
49 Appadurai, The Social Life of Things.
50 Ibid.
52 Ibid.


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