

**The Material Culture of Exiled Families Housed in Hotels:  
Tensions between Settling in and Instability**  
**La culture matérielle des familles exilées hébergées à l'hôtel :  
entre installation et instabilité**

Laetitia Overney

Volume 96, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109046ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1109046ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cape Breton University Press

ISSN

1718-1259 (print)  
1927-9264 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Overney, L. (2023). The Material Culture of Exiled Families Housed in Hotels: Tensions between Settling in and Instability. *Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle*, 96, 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1109046ar>

Article abstract

This article combines the topics of material culture, poverty and migration. It describes the material culture of families exiled in France who are illegal immigrants, living without resources and without independent accommodation. They are put up in budget hotel rooms by social services, often staying for several years. How do these families of three or four live in their hotel room? What objects do they surround themselves with? What does the accumulation of objects mean to these families? What are their spatial practices with these objects?

The lot in life of these illegal migrants is to wait – they have been waiting for several years for their situation to be regularized, which would mean being able to get a job, job training, economic resources and independent accommodation. This article starts with the objects of migration so as to arrive at an understanding of the conditions of these subjects in exile.

It describes the domestic arrangements and daily gestures that this accommodation renders difficult. In particular, it addresses the dual problem for these families exiled in France of storage and clutter – an important aspect of material cultures. By analysing storage spaces, I will show how families constitute for themselves a material culture of habitation as they await their official status.

## LAETITIA OVERNEY

École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville

### *The Material Culture of Exiled Families Housed in Hotels: Tensions between Settling in and Instability*

#### *Material Culture, Poverty, Exile*

It may seem oxymoronic to describe the material culture of the poor. Poverty is often thought to signify deprivation and, in some cases, destitution – but always exclusion from consumption. Their destitution would be even greater when these poor people are migrants because they could not take much with them during their dangerous exile.<sup>i</sup> Why, then, take interest in poor people's material culture? Whilst the poor live in need and deprivation, at a closer look, they nevertheless surround themselves with objects that accompany them in their daily lives: indispensable household objects, second-hand objects, objects bought cheap or objects that were either donated or found in the rubbish. In other words, objects that matter to them. Poor people evolve different means of using these objects, demonstrating initiative, inventiveness, and creativity under difficult living conditions.

This article combines the topics of material culture, poverty, and migration.<sup>ii</sup> It describes the material culture of families exiled in France who are illegal immigrants, living without resources and without independent accommodation. It focuses on the form of migration that tends to be labelled 'irregular,' or sometimes 'undocumented' or 'illegal.' According to

Christine M. Jacobsen and Marry-Anne Karlsen, "these terms refer to people who enter or dwell on state territory without formal authorisation, and comprise a wide range of situations, including those who remain on state territory after having overstayed their visa, having had their residency revoked or asylum application rejected or never having applied for residency or asylum. (...) The boundary between 'regular' and 'irregular' in particular socio-historical contexts can often be overlapping, fluid and contextual" (Jacobsen and Karlsens 2021, 1). This is why even though the people I have met are mostly illegal migrants, I prefer the more inclusive term 'exiles' to emphasize the experience of exile. Families I met come from West Africa, Eastern Europe, North Africa and Central Africa. Under the constraint of threats, violence or extreme poverty, exiles had to leave a country where they could not assert their rights. Exiles also expresses wandering and deep uncertainty that these people encounter in France while waiting for a protective status. Exiles are migrants whose presence on state territory is somehow contested and/or legally precarious.

Once in France, some families are put up in budget hotel rooms by social services, often staying for several years. How do

these families of three or four live in their hotel room? What objects do they surround themselves with? What does the accumulation of objects mean to these families? What are their spatial practices *with* these objects? The fate of these illegal migrants is to wait because they have been waiting for several years for their situation to be regularized, which would mean being able to get a job, job training, economic resources, and independent accommodation. Following other researchers, I stress that waiting, “temporal insecurity and conflicts in time [are] a crucial element of migrants’ experiences of (im)mobility and inequality” (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2020, 2).

This article starts with the objects of migration so as to arrive at an understanding of the conditions of these subjects in exile (Alexandre-Garener and Galitzine-Loumpet 2020). The geographer Nicky Gregson has shown how, in conventional accommodation, being at home consists of cohabiting with things: accommodating – and thus homemaking – is a “constant reciprocal process of accommodation, involving houses, people and the things within them” (2007, 24). I want to focus here on what “living with things” means in the specific circumstances of exile, poverty and hotel accommodation. My article describes the domestic arrangements and daily gestures that this accommodation renders difficult. In particular, it addresses the dual problems for these families exiled in France of storage and clutter – an important aspect of material cultures (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003).

Sophie Woodward explored “how the moral dilemmas clutter presents occur in the context of familial and domestic

relations” (2021, 1215). In particular, she explained how in rich societies “the popularity of de-cluttering has created a normative sense of what people ‘should’ do with their stuff – keeping what is useful or loved – and where it should be kept” (Woodward 2021, 1218). This normative approach is reflected in programs like that of Marie Kondo (Ouellette 2019). Woodward nevertheless demonstrated that people are able to negotiate ‘with themselves’ and to manage the tensions between accumulation and frugality, clutter and de-cluttering. In other words, there is no dichotomy between storage and clutter in ordinary housing. I assert in contrast that this dichotomy structures exiles’ domestic life. Most of them cannot really choose *what* they keep and *where* it should be kept.

By analysing storage spaces, I will show how families constitute for themselves a material culture of habitation as they await their official status. Generally, the families own cheap consumer goods (household articles, clothing, second-hand objects or gifts). These are the objects of daily life or those linked to their cultural practices. Hotel rooms are interesting to examine as storage spaces. They are minimal spaces (nine square metres), inhabited by families of three or four. There is little space for storing their possessions. The room is often dilapidated and does not belong to the family since they are housed by social services for several years. Appropriation is therefore difficult. How are objects stored in 9 m<sup>2</sup>? What storage spaces do the families invent?

Finally, I will show how the accumulation of objects and the attachment of families to their possessions reinforce kinship,

which is weakened by precarious living conditions.

These storage spaces are the interface between migrants and society. The flow of objects gives us clues as to the place of exiles in society and the space that society allows them to occupy. The dual problem of storage and disorder creates a dialectic between settling in and instability. The exiles intensify their presence by accumulating and appropriating objects. They organize their family life without being able to guarantee the true putting down of roots that a regular status and an actual right to accommodation would confer.

#### *Methodology*

This research has been funded by PUCA (Plan Urbanisme Construction Architecture). This interministerial French service develops research programmes as well as experimental and innovative actions in town planning, housing, construction, and urban and architectural design.

The article is based on an ethnographic survey conducted over 18 months, from September 2018 to February 2020, mainly in four hotels in the Paris region.<sup>iii</sup> I followed some 20 families and met the hotel managers. A large part of the survey took place in the hotels' foyers, corridors and shared kitchens, where I observed the exiles as they moved about, stopped and chatted. Sometimes, I was invited into their rooms to talk or drink tea. The research material primarily consists of these observations and informal discussion with the exiles. I also conducted more in-depth interviews with some of them and with the hotel managers. Some of the case studies are

accompanied by realist photographs of objects and arrangements.

This kind of ethnographic fieldwork "behind closed doors" (Miller 2001) deals with intimacy/privacy. I was inevitably intrusive by visiting exiles in their room – sometimes sitting on their bed for lack of space, by looking closely at their personal belongings. Daniel Miller notes this risk but justifies these studies "even where they were clearly experienced as intrusive" (Miller, 2001, 1). Miller challenges political correctness compromising the value of research: "an anthropology that thinks that sensitivity about being too intrusive is demonstrated by remaining outside and respecting the distance of conventional social proxemics is a dead anthropology" (2001, 15). In other words, sociologists and anthropologists must assume this intrusion into intimacy/privacy and dare to enter into relations with people in order to better understand their domestic life with objects.

In comparison with the people Miller and his research group met, the situation of exiles I met is very different. In his book, *Home Possessions*, Miller explores the homes of the middle and sometimes working classes. In my study, the fieldwork in hotels was situated within radically different social context. Undeniably, intrusion took on a different meaning because the families and I very pragmatically soon felt cramped for interview in such a small room, to the point neither they nor I would prolong the conversation. It is worth mentioning here that the residents were subject to intrusions and inspections of their rooms by the social worker or the manager to see if everything is in order. With time I was able to gain the trust of some families who

invited me to their room. I was careful not to stay too long so as not to disturb them too much and visited when not all the family members were home. I took these precautions because I nevertheless believe that shedding light on the domestic and material lives of poor and exile people is important. Ethnographic texts may be a resource for their public existence, to make their problems visible and to show they are fully involved in society. This article proposes a contrasting narrative of supposed ‘radical alterity’ (them *vs* us) by underlining the shared aspects of exiles’ material culture.

My research followed the ethical standards of research practices that apply at the École nationale supérieure d’architecture de Paris-Belleville. The main ethical problem concerns the protection of exiles who spoke to me during the fieldwork and who often complained about their living conditions, rooms unfit for habitation, incompetent social workers, restrictive rules in the hotel, or discriminatory behaviours of the managers. Also, some of them explained to me how they broke the rules by cooking in their room, furnishing the room with their own furniture, or working on the side. Their status is precarious because they are housed by a social service that can evict them overnight or shunt them around from hotel to hotel if the exiles are too vindictive, make troubles or break the rules. The most important thing was to not harm their case and not put them at risk by doing my research.

Consequently, I made several ethical commitments. During my encounters with the exiles and hotel managers, I explained to them the framework of the research, which is funded by PUCA, a

public body that is independent of social assistance institutions. I guaranteed their confidentiality. The names of people, hotels and towns have therefore been rendered anonymous. I obtained oral consent from all persons mentioned in this article for sharing the survey results, including photos, in an academic setting. The logbook and images are securely stored on my work computer. Interviews were not recorded other than by taking notes.

*Fieldwork: People and Sites*

Due to the lack of space in emergency shelters in the Paris region, social services have since the late 1990s been paying for houseless exiles to stay in budget hotels for one or more nights and, in some cases, for several months or even years. These hotels make it possible to both take some of the strain off shelters and reunite members of the same family who may be scattered, and to avoid contact between different users of emergency shelters (for instance, the houseless or families with children) (Le Mener 2013). Over 10 years, recourse to hotel accommodation has jumped by 360% (Fondation Abbé Pierre 2018, 298). According to the Fondation Abbé Pierre’s 2020 report, “L’état du mal logement en France,” around 50,000 people were put up in hotels every night in 2019, which represents a 7% rise over the previous year (Fondation Abbé Pierre 2019, 14). In 2018, half of those being housed in hotels were children (Fondation Abbé Pierre 2019). Over 85% of these hotel nights are concentrated in Greater Paris. Families make up almost the entirety of those housed in hotels: parents with child(ren) or a single parent with child(ren).

Who are the families I met? Of the twenty families in my sample, ten come from West Africa, five from Eastern Europe, four from North Africa and one from Central Africa. All have lived in the current hotel for over six months, and all had been put up in other hotels before. Some were in the same hotel for seven years; others have changed hotels ten times in three years. Overall, 44% of families being housed in the Paris region have been housed for over two years (Fondation Abbé Pierre 2020; 16).

Most of the families are irregular migrants, although several families have been regularized for a year but have not been offered social housing. The latter are housed under the childhood protection system (“Aide sociale à l’enfance”), which in France is managed by the *départements*.<sup>iv</sup> Considering homelessness as a danger to children, the institution may give shelter to irregular migrants. The conditions are nevertheless restrictive and vary greatly from one *département* to another. For example, in the Greater Paris region, the Val-d’Oise *département* funds hotel nights for pregnant women or women with children under three years old who are single parents and have parenting-related needs. The accommodation can, in theory, be prolonged until the family is given housing. The *département* can also terminate accommodation if the accommodation contracts are not adhered to. Each household is asked for a financial contribution (of 10% of its total resources).

What are the hotels like in which they are put up, and where are they located? The “budget hotel” franchises (Formule 1, subsequently called F1; Première Classe; Lemon; Etap Hotel; etc.) were built in the

mid-1980s on the periphery of towns and close to the main traffic arteries. Originally, they were intended for business travellers or holidaymakers travelling by car who wanted a stopover. In France, this was an entirely new concept.<sup>v</sup> The hotels’ budget economy is founded on austere service and austere rooms. Each room’s surface area is thus reduced to the absolute minimum: 9 m<sup>2</sup>. It is furnished with a single sink, a double bed on the floor and a single bunk bed. This room for three looks like a cell. Some have a shower and toilet. The layout has been calculated so that a cleaner spends only half the time cleaning the room compared to a traditional hotel. Another factor in the hotels’ profitability is their inexpensive construction: the concrete cells are built, furnished in the factory, transported by truck and assembled by module; the prefabricated panels are assembled on site, where the water and sewage pipes have already been installed. Common areas (foyers, corridors, in some cases bathrooms) are reduced to a minimum. In 1996 the chief executive of the Formule 1 Group summarized the strategy as follows: “We are the everyman’s hotel in the same way that McDonald’s is the everyman’s restaurant.”<sup>vi</sup>

The hotels are located on the periphery of large towns only a few minutes from major traffic arteries and have large car-parks. In the 1990s they were mainly meant for car users. The location of the hotels did not take into account the lack of public transport. In the mid-2000s and especially the 2010s, the hotels fell into disuse. They no longer met clients’ expectations and were too far from tourist sites. Many rooms were empty. The hotels were thus an opportunity for social services, which needed to accommodate houseless

people. The owners grasped this unexpected economic opportunity. Today the hotels are full. They house exiles without any modification to the architecture: minimal common areas, narrow corridors, small rooms of 9 m<sup>2</sup> with maximum use of the habitable area. Their location in neglected parts of town forces exiles to make return trips to the city centre (for shops, public services, etc.). But how does one live in 9 m<sup>2</sup>?

### 1. The Art of Stacking

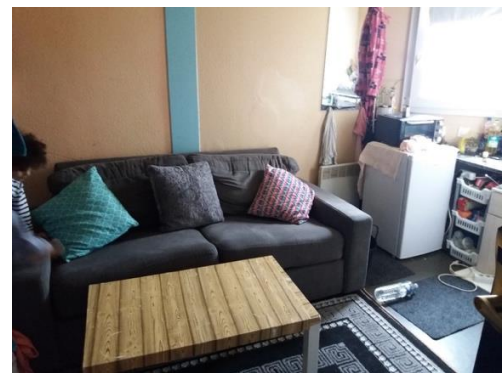
The ethnographic fieldwork results are presented here in narrative form. This “narrative turn” (Geertz 1980) seemed the best way to describe together the layout of the sites, the motions, daily objects, histories and hotel life of the people involved. Our approach here is akin to narrative anthropology (Reck 1983) and to narrative sociology (Laé, Madec and Murard 2016). Narrative anthropology and sociology are part of the long tradition of thinking about reality through writing. Narrative is a weapon to give back flesh to words and people. Through variations of meaning, by evoking emotions, narration exerts a reflexive force on thought: an interpretative feature, a material culture, a particular insight, a social posture. Its sensitive quality embodies a communicable modality: the discomfort of imposed collective life, the atmosphere of a small home, the relationships between people and their home, the family links, the fear of being evicted and made homeless.

#### *Nadia in her room*

Let us explore domestic life at the hotel through the case of Nadia. This young

Moroccan woman invited me into her room for a cup of tea. She lives with her husband and five-year-old daughter in this 9 m<sup>2</sup> room in a hotel in Villiers-le-Bel (Val-d’Oise). They have been living here for a year, after spending two years in another hotel a few kilometres away.

To compensate for the austerity of her room (a double bed, a single bunk bed, no wardrobe), Nadia explains that she has “laid out her room like a house.” The space looks bigger than her neighbours’ rooms – she has put in a sofa bed, and the manager has taken back the bedstead and mattress (figure 1). She can fold up the bed during the day: “I’ve made room so my daughter can play!” She bought the sofa bed for 100 euros from a woman she used to clean for cash in hand. It was worth 450 euros. Nadia calculates the savings. She asks me to sit down next to her on the sofa in front of the coffee table where the family eats all its meals. The TV is on a high shelf on the wall opposite. Under our feet is a beige and black rug, a gift. At the head of the sofa bed is a child’s bed with cuddly toys: Winnie the Pooh has been with the little girl since the first hotel.



**Figure1**  
**Nadia's room, 2020, L. Overney.**

The bunk bed, still too high up for the little girl, is used for storage (a duvet, blankets, an iron, a roll of paper towel, some carefully folded clothes, drawing materials). Underneath, plastic boxes are stacked up that contain the child's clothes and, next to them, a suitcase with clothes for Nadia. Next to the clothes boxes are two other boxes for toys (figure 2). The couple also has a small table (70 x 70 cm) covered in shiny cloth. Underneath it are the husband's clothes stored in a travel bag and their rolled-up prayer rug. Nadia also has a small table with two folding plastic chairs, bought at the discount supermarket opposite the hotel. The room has a booth, a sort of prefabricated polyester shell measuring 1.5 metres by 1.5 metres, with a shower and sink, where dishes can be done.<sup>vii</sup>



**Figure 2**  
Boxes in Nadia's room, 2020, L. Overney.

Living in a single room does not mean living in a single space (Rosselin 2002). Like other exiles living in hotels, Nadia tries to work on her space by arranging the domestic objects. She has divided up her 9 m<sup>2</sup> and defined distinct living spaces: the bedroom area with the baby's bed and the couple's sofa bed for the night; the living and playing area with the sofa bed and the low table during the day. Each member of the family has a corner to store their clothes.

To go with the tea, Nadia offers me cakes, which she has baked herself with her daughter. This is the opportunity for her to show me her kitchen corner (figure 3). Officially, cooking in the bedrooms is forbidden, as is having a refrigerator there. But since the hotel's shared kitchen is too small to allow everyone to cook their meals (see below), the manager has finally turned a blind eye and even installed the refrigerators on the upper floors himself. Next to the small window is where Nadia has hers. She has put an electric mini oven on top. There is also a table with an electric hot plate and a microwave oven; underneath it, all the ingredients and kitchen utensils are carefully stored in plastic drawers on wheels. The mini oven comes from the flea market organized one Sunday a month in the car park of the discount supermarket. An extension cable runs along the wall: the hotel room only has one outlet. Nadia is constantly confronted with kitchen smells; only a few centimetres separate her kitchen from the living area. The smells are difficult to ignore, even when she is concentrating on the TV news or ironing clothes on the sofa, her back to the kitchen.





**Figure 3**  
Nadia's cooking corner, 2020, L. Overney.

The household functions according to the gendered *breadwinner model*: the husband goes to work; the wife looks after the house and household (Potucheck 1997). Managing the money is a job for Nadia: she has to skimp at all times, buy second-hand articles, and not spend too much (Pahl & Vogler 1994). Nadia's husband has undeclared work, he carries the boxes to the market. He gets up early and when he returns at 3 pm, Nadia goes to the park with her child to let him rest. In only 9 m<sup>2</sup>, physical contact between family members is continuous. The single room contains several areas, but since everything happens at the same time, the olfactory, noise and visual disturbances are permanent.



**Figure 4**  
Nadia's front door is difficult to open completely, 2020, L. Overney.

The family washes, sleeps, cooks, plays, eats and prays in 9 m<sup>2</sup>. But they keep going. Photos of the child are on the walls. Everything is perfectly tidied, cleverly organized, everything has its place, nothing spills over in these 9 m<sup>2</sup>. The room door only opens partway, blocked by a suitcase or trunk – this is the case in all the rooms I saw (figure 4). You slip into the room rather than enter it. This configuration forces the residents to be very disciplined about tidying up every day. The woman of the household must keep an eye on domestic order. There is perpetual stacking and storing – e.g., provisions and utensils under a table/ microwave/hot plate/cutlery trays. Clothes must be carefully folded to prevent piles from collapsing. These piles structure the household's equipment for months.

*Contending with Ephemeral Objects, or: Plastic Rules*

What is the temporality of domestic objects? Some are made to last, like a wooden wardrobe, a wooden trunk from the Middle Ages or a silver piece of cutlery. This heavy furniture is a symbol of proven solidity; they will be passed on as heirlooms and contain part of the family memory (Gotman 1988; Chevalier 1996). The importance of the physical properties of objects, their affordances (the weight, textures and tactilities of the material world) are almost impossible to neglect. Objects such as wooden wardrobes are spaces of intimacy, as Bachelard explains (2009, 79-91). They are filled with “objects of affection” (Dassié 2010). In contrast, what domestic objects accompany exiles in transit? Exiles furnish their rooms with sideboards; plastic drawer units on wheels; plastic or cardboard boxes that can be stacked to the ceiling; wheeled suitcases temporarily transformed into linen baskets; small folding tables and chairs; 50 litre plastic laundry bins. Made of light, often translucent materials, this inexpensive occasional furniture is meant for temporary use (figure 2).

In the long term, the storage is reminiscent of the metal “locker” found in accommodation for migrant workers or in factories: a cloakroom locker, at times with a padlock, for temporary, functional and logical use. These are provisional furniture and objects for provisional residents (Sayad 1980).

In some cases, a sofa bed like Nadia’s transforms the situation: the room is a bedroom by night and a living-room by day. Objects transform space. The objects of exile are also often

reappropriated objects. For example, one resident has turned a rice cooker bought from a famous French second-hand website into a slow cooker to heat canned food in their bedroom. On the way back from food handouts, baby buggies are used as trolleys to carry provisions. Many women still do small handwashes in a plastic bowl under the shower; the rest is washed at the laundromat once a week. These precarious arrangements last a long time.

## 2. The Itinerant Kitchen

*Mrs. Efoui and others*

Let us now consider other practices of cooking through the case of the Efoui family. While Nadia cooks in the privacy of her room and suffers from kitchen smells that spread through her sleeping space, Mrs. Efoui externalizes this practice in the collective kitchen and is watched by other women. While Nadia’s experience is typified by the constraints of cooking in a small space, Mrs. Efoui must move her kitchen within the building.

Saturday afternoon, shortly after 1 pm: Mrs. Efoui is finally alone in the kitchen – the only kitchen for 57 families – and takes up position in front of the six hot plates. The space had been occupied all morning by other residents; she had to wait her turn, as she does every Saturday. Today she starts by broiling five pieces of fish and boiling rice (figure 5). Next to her, on the work surface, are two large, thick plastic bags. They contain everything she needs for her recipes: fresh tomatoes, pieces of chicken, spices, fresh peppers and chillies, canned spinach, shrimp and dried fish, tomato

concentrate, garlic, rice, a five-litre bottle of sunflower oil, and stock cubes. Each ingredient is wrapped in a small plastic bag that the cook opens and closes with care. These bags are her larder. In her bedroom, they are stored under a little table, stuffed in between the suitcase containing her daughter's clothes, her son's trunk of toys and her husband's safety boots.

Mrs. Efoui cooks once a week. She works in a Paris hotel as a cleaner and leaves home at 7:30 am to return towards the end of the day. She takes the bus, then the train, a journey of an hour. During the week, she just has the time to cook rice or pasta and serve them with the sauce prepared in large quantities the previous Saturday. Everything is pre-planned. She bought her fresh produce the day before, and she often does a bit of shopping in Château Rouge, a Parisian neighbourhood with a good number of African food shops. In her bags are also a stew-pot, a frying-pan, two saucepans bought at the discount supermarket 300 metres from the hotel, a good knife for cutting raw meat, a sieve, wooden spoons, an electric mincer for shredding the shrimp and the dried fish, and above all, many plastic boxes for storing the prepared food. They will go into the small refrigerator in her bedroom. Everything she needs is in her bags. She has her cooking habits: she has been living in this hotel for five years.



**Figure 5**  
Mrs. Efoui cooking in the collective kitchen with all her utensils, 2020, L. Overney.

Mrs. Efoui is now working on the sauce; she is making two big pots. Then she wants to fry chicken pieces.

A young woman, Mariam, enters the kitchen, puts water on to boil and goes back up to her bedroom.

It is almost 3 pm, and one of Mrs. Efoui's sauces is ready. She fills a plastic box and returns to her bedroom... But the sauce spills, and the tiles of the entrance hall are splattered red, the stairs as well... A few minutes later, she comes back down, cleaning as she goes. She fills another box that her daughter takes to their bedroom. No drips on the floor this time. "Up, down, up, down," sighs Mrs. Efoui.

A few moments later, Mariam comes back down. She is careful now. Last month, she put eggs on to boil, went to her bedroom and forgot. After 45 minutes, everything exploded in the saucepan.

Now it is Mrs. Diop's turn to take her place in front of the work surface. Well organized, she has a plastic basket filled with utensils and ingredients in one hand, her own hot plate in the other. She has brought it down from her bedroom. Like Mrs. Efoui, she has everything she needs in her portable larder: the meat, onions that she has already peeled in her room, garlic, stock cubes, chillies, rice that she has already rinsed, a saucepan, a big knife, a wooden spoon, and a frying pan are all in place.

For Mrs. Efoui, the afternoon of cooking nears its end. It is 5 pm. After four hours in the kitchen preparing dishes, waiting for them to simmer, putting them in containers, exchanging a few words with the neighbours, washing the utensils, and storing them in her plastic bags, she can return to her bedroom. Her daughter helps. But it still takes six return journeys to clear the kitchen. Mrs. Efoui has cooked for four hours and made all the week's meals.

#### *The Blurring of Private and Public Spheres*

Preparing meals in the shared kitchen of a hotel is a form of ambulant cooking. The practices involved are akin to those of street vendors in the informal economy, who carry their shops and merchandise single-handedly. They reveal both a profound unease and the many ways in which people must adapt to their material conditions to be able to cook *in spite of everything*. Piles of utensils and plastic bags are used to make the return journey between the bedroom and the shared space of the kitchen. This practice of ambulant cooking blurs the borders between private and public spheres. Culinary practices and tastes, supposedly intimate and

familial, are revealed in public when having to cook food watched by other women and when sharing utensils; when plastic containers let their aromas escape in the corridors; and when plastic bags strain to conceal their contents in the shared refrigerator.

This scene of mobile cooking takes place once a week. At the hotel, only one meal is cooked, dinner – nothing else. Children frequently skip lunch, except when they go to the school refectory. Saturdays and Sundays, lunch may be one tin of food for three people, donated by a charity and heated in situ, in the room's last free square metre. The one meal of the day has no fixed hour. Sleep is snatched irregularly night and day. The irregular lives thus produced cause physical problems diagnosed by doctors. There is a shortage of space, meals, and sleep.

### **3. Flow Dynamics**

#### *Storage, clutter, overflow*

The space of exiles is saturated by objects, which provoke daily struggles with hotel managers. In some hotels, the rules are radical: no decoration, no posters and “NO CLUTTER IN THE ROOMS. ONE SUITCASE PER PERSON ONLY,” according to the regulations posted in the foyer. The manager insists on being able to clean easily and, above all, to prevent the families from settling in completely by stockpiling their possessions. In other establishments, managers make do, turn a blind eye and try to facilitate things. For instance, one installed a sort of container on the parking load to relieve the congestion in the bedrooms: bikes, large suitcases and cardboard storage boxes accumulate there. For access,

residents have to ask him for the key. A second, accessible container has been placed by the hotel entrance, with a notice stating that “this space is exclusively reserved for pushchairs.” The container is a temporary construction that accompanies the transit of exiles, from “humanitarian camps and shelters” to the hotel. The manager’s most recent initiative is a second-hand clothes cupboard in the reception area for clothing for children and adults, stuffed animals and other toys left by departing families or donated by associations – a help-yourself charity cupboard.

The manager also tolerates the six cars in the car park, which are no longer used and serve as storage space to relieve the nine square metres of certain families. In them are mattresses, chairs, bags full of clothing, a reserve of toilet paper bought on special offer, kinkeliba<sup>viii</sup> branches for tea, spare mechanical parts and salvaged pots of paint. The disused cars help to gain space. Are objects saved for future accommodation? The inhabitants resist such dreams. Some families leave objects with close friends or family while waiting... The cars also enable people to sit down for a few hours in summer. Men especially come in search of a breath of fresh air and sit down to listen to the radio.

### *Moving*

Whilst 44% of families housed by social service in Greater Paris have been housed for more than two years (Fondation Abbé Pierre 2020), their situation remains uncertain. Where will they be in a month or a year? The hotel is provisional – the successive moves and nomadism will continue.

Take the example of Françoise. She has just learned that she will be leaving the hotel for an apartment several kilometres away. The next day in the foyer she takes new clothes from the charity cupboard, and she leaves others. She has three suitcases and two bags and is angry: “It’s not possible to move from one place to another like this! No, it’s not possible to take the bus like this!” Françoise does hair braiding; she is worried about her losing her clients by moving away.

During the survey, I witnessed several of these removals to another hotel or, in some cases, to more stable housing. They were accomplished using plastic bags and usually by the women alone; under their breath, they muttered the same words: “We’ll get used to it,” said in a tone suggesting “it’s so long and difficult.”

Another day, Marvelous, who left the hotel five days earlier, is visiting. She has come back for bags waiting for her in the foyer – five large plastic bags. She won’t be able to carry it all on the bus! She calls a friend, Constance, and asks her to bring down a bigger bag. She is leaving her a bucket and sponge. The manager, Katia, checks the size of the bucket: “That’s OK,” she says. Marvelous has to leave quickly, go to the town hall and then come back to the shelter, all by bus and carrying enormous plastic bags.

The following month, in the Oise *département*, Leonard, 39, is resignedly waiting outside the hotel with his son. “This is already the seventh transfer for us,” he says. He and his family arrived from Albania two years ago. After eleven months in this hotel, they are about to return to a different town, where they have been before. “It’s not OK!” Leonard says angrily.

“What a disaster!” sighs his partner Aurela, who is sitting on the luggage. By bus or on foot, these removals from accommodation to accommodation disrupt the exiles’ trajectory: the wobbling objects and clothes spilling out of bags echo the trembling families, who will be forced to rebuild an equilibrium elsewhere.

### Conclusion

The objects and uses thereof that this article describes constitute the material culture of exiles. They are indicative of ways of living while waiting for regularisation. They are characterized by both instability and the determination and efforts deployed by the exiles to find a certain measure of stability. Wardrobes on wheels, suitcases that become linen cupboards, transparent boxes, plastic bags, ambulant kitchens: these seemingly ephemeral objects support a daily life that has a wealth of practices. The material culture established over the years of waiting in hotels is a dialectic between settling-in and instability. The exiles intensify their presence without being able to obtain true settled status, in other words regularisation, social rights, the right to work and to housing.

Material life occupies the minds. The crucial accumulation of reserves monopolizes all energy. This is above all the task of women, who look after the space and manage the household’s meagre resources. As in other poor families studied by anthropologists, managing money is itself a job. These women are more or less hanging on, in an unstable equilibrium.

Exiles’ relationships with things in their home are more than just cohabiting and homemaking. How can they create and

maintain family links under these conditions of hotel life? “Living with things” means preserving memory and family links, taking pleasure at home. To fight back against the void of waiting, Nadia takes the time to pass down to her daughter the pleasure of cooking and baking, a family tradition that cannot wait. Mrs. Efoui often suggests to her daughter that they cook together. Like them, other exiles also take pleasure in putting together a full set of kitchen equipment, in cooking for a long time, in surrounding themselves with objects they like. Accumulating and using these objects ensures a more pleasant daily existence. Whilst the objects have little economic value (being second-hand and old, and often damaged), they are precious for people because they improve life at the hotel. An old, second-hand, electric mini oven can change someone’s life. Storing these objects also means preserving family values: traditional recipes, domestic practices, religious practices, school memories, memories of childhood spent in hotels. A place, however minuscule, has been reserved for them. Such is the life of the exiled families who accrue here. As N. Gibson has already demonstrated for ordinary housing, this survey reveals how material practices (the organisation of the room, the decoration, tidying, storage, cooking) maintain family relationships as well as relationships with the country of origin and the host country. Ethnographic fieldwork results underline the shared aspects of exiles’ material culture despite the specific circumstances of exile, poverty, and hotel accommodation.

However, objects pile up without any certainty as to the future, without the “domestic fossilisation” (Dassié 2009, 134) that characterizes family wardrobes

where nothing has been touched for years. In contrast, in a hotel, objects are moved and tidied away almost every day. The manager has the right to inspect everyone's possessions. And when a family is directed towards another hotel, everything must be moved again. What will come after the hotel? Housing? A different hotel? The street? The issue raises many fears and questions. Anyone taking an interest in the spatial and material anchorage of exiles can see the extent to which the enforced mobility of exiles is reflected in their furnishings.

Dichotomy between storage and clutter structures exiles' domestic life. In most hotels, families live in such minuscule spaces, closely controlled by hotel managers that they are not able to negotiate and to manage their own practice of storage and cluttering. They live under pressure despite arrangements. Exiles had better not be noticed through clutter or with too many objects as their legal status is precarious – they are just temporarily housed. Being housed by a social service is a fragile right. In other words, they are not allowed to settle in.

Storage for objects is rarely foregrounded in ethnography. This may be because, in ordinary housing, such spaces are not initially very visible, but rather hidden. In budget hotel rooms, by contrast, they take up almost all the space and are very apparent. Taking an interest in these storage practices provides a new way of making visible the spaces inhabited by the poor and by exiles. This survey emphasizes people's capacity for finding solutions to tidying away their possessions, accumulating objects, transmitting practices to their children, and maintaining a daily life that is as stable as possible. It

also emphasizes the role of material culture in social relationships, especially within the family.

Contemporary material culture studies should focus on the poor: what about domestic life in conditions of deprivation, dislocation, where the norms and rituals of the everyday are disrupted?

## References

- Alexandre-Garner, Corinne, and Alexandra Galitzine-Lompét (eds.). 2020. *L'objet de la migration : le sujet en exil*, Nanterre, Presses Universitaires de Nanterre.
- Bachelard, Gaston. 2009. *La poétique de l'espace*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Chevalier, Sophie. 1996. « Transmettre son mobilier ? Le cas contrasté de la France et de l'Angleterre. » *Ethnologie française*, 26(1): 115-128.
- Cwerner, Saulo B., and Alan Metcalfe. 2003. "Storage and Clutter: Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World." *Journal of Design History*, 16(3), Oxford University Press: 229-239.
- Dassié, Véronique. 2010. *Objets d'affection: une ethnologie de l'intime*, Paris : Éditions du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques.
- Dassié, Véronique. 2009. « Les fils de l'intimité. » *Ethnologie française*, 39 (1): 133-140.
- Edwards, Elizabeth, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Philips. 2006. *Sensible Objects*:

- Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, Oxford: Berg.
- Fondation Abbé Pierre. 2020. "Etat du mal-logement 2019"
- Fondation Abbé Pierre. 2019. "Etat du mal-logement 2018"
- Fondation Abbé Pierre. 2018. "Etat du mal-logement 2017"
- Geertz, Clifford. 1980. "Blurred Genre: The Reconfiguration of Social Thought." *American Scholar*, 49: 165-179.
- Gotman, Anne. 1991. *Hériter*, 1st edn, Paris, Presses universitaires de France (Economie en liberté).
- Gregson, Nicky. 2007. *Living with Things: Ridding, Accommodation, Dwelling, Wantage*, Sean Kingston Publishing.
- Jacobsen M. Christine, Marry-Anne Karlsen, and , Shahram Khosravi . 2021. *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*, Routledge.
- Laé, Jean-François, Annick Madec, and Numa Murard (eds.). 2016. "Narrative sociology: the power of storytelling." *Sociologie et société*, 48 (2).
- Le Mener, Erwan. 2013. "L'hôtellerie sociale: un nouveau marché de la misère ? Le cas de l'Île-de-France." *Revue des politiques sociales et familiales*, edited by Daniel Miller, 114 (1): 7-18.
- Ouellette, Laurie. 2019. "Spark Joy? Compulsory Happiness and the Feminist Politics of Decluttering." *Culture Unbound. Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 11(3-4).
- <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.191108>.
- Pahl, Jan and Carolyn Vogler. 1994. "Money, Power and Inequality within Marriage." *The Sociological Review*, 42 (2): 2363-288.
- Potuchek, Jean-L. 1997. *Who Supports the Family? Gender and Breadwinning in Dual-Earner Marriages*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Reck, Georges. 1983. "Narrative Anthropology." *Anthropology and Humanism*, 8 (1): 8-12.
- Rosselin Céline. 2002. "Pratiques habitantes dans des logements d'une seule pièce." *Communications*, 73 (1): 95-112.
- Sayad, Abdelmalek. 1980. "Le foyer des sans-famille." *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*. 32 (1) : 89-103.
- Woodward, Sophie. 2021. "Clutter in Domestic Spaces: Material Vibrancy, and Competing Moralities." *The Sociological Review*, 69(6): 1214-1228.
2001. *Home possessions. Material Culture behind Closed Doors*. Edited by Daniel Miller. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers.



---

<sup>i</sup> A small backpack is the emblem of the destitution of the exiles. The International Rescue Committee (NGO) asked refugees in a shelter in Lesbos (Greece) to share the contents of their small bags and show what they managed to hold on to from their homes. Their meager belongings are exhibited here: <https://medium.com/uprooted/what-s-in-my-bag-758d435f6e62>

<sup>ii</sup> For thoughts on the material cultures of migrants in museums, see Edwards, Gosden and Philips 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> The fieldwork was conducted with Jean-François Laé, Professor at the University of Paris 8-Saint-Denis.

<sup>iv</sup> France is divided into 101 départements. Each is run by its own local council, the « conseil départemental ». In particular, this institution is in charge of social and health policies (care in old age, disability, childhood protection system etc.)

<sup>v</sup> Previously, cheap hotels had been small, family-run, city-centre establishments.

<sup>vi</sup> Cited by Bourgois J-F, Jallat F. 1994. “Histoire d’une innovation de service réussie: le lancement de Formule 1,” *Décisions marketing*, (2) 34.

<sup>vii</sup> In other hotels, sanitary facilities are shared.

<sup>viii</sup> A West African medicinal plant that grows on branches about one metre long; the leaves of this shrub are used to make herbal tea.