

Emotional Baggage

Unpacking the Suitcase

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Two Hollywood suitcases

A woman rushes upstairs past her guests at a funeral reception in her elegant, upper-class home in Milan. Emma, played by Tilda Swinton, just can't take this life any longer; she needs to get out of the claustrophobic setting she married into ... *now!* Her housekeeper runs after her, understanding completely what is going on. Together they throw open wardrobe doors and begin to pack a travel bag. This is the final scene of the film *I Am Love* from 2010; tears are streaming, and clothes are being torn from their hangers.

It is a classic scene. The heroine has had enough and can't wait to leave. For the film's audience, it is clear that it is not the suitcase that is important, but the need to pack for a new life. The mixed feelings of anger, sorrow and anxiety for the future must be given a tangible form: clothes are ripped from shelves, stuff thrown into a bag. Without a packed suitcase, there is no final break-up. Body, objects and affects are working intensely together here. Yet, when Emma walks out of the house a few minutes later, she is not carrying a suitcase. It has already done its job.

My next Hollywood suitcase has a major part in the film *The Accidental Tourist* from 1988. The film features a travel writer, played by William Hurt, who specialises in writing books for business travellers who want to avoid the foreignness and anxieties of travel and remain untouched by the exotic, eating in McDonalds whenever possible and wearing practical grey suits that do not show any stains. The film begins

with the writer neatly packing a small suitcase and preaching about the necessities of packing light. This favourite carry-on case of his follows him throughout the film. When he moves in with a new woman, it remains unpacked next to the bed as a silent but menacing threat ('are you thinking of leaving me?'). When, in the end, he opts for a new life with her, he drops his beloved suitcase in a Paris alley before grabbing a taxi to the airport, leaving it behind him, filled as it is with his old life.

It is not surprising that suitcases are popular co-actors in media narratives, from novels to movies, songs and advertisements. These two Hollywood examples illustrate how suitcases can do many things besides carrying belongings. The suitcase is not only a container for stuff, but also for affects, dreams, anxieties and ideals. It can be many things: a distillation of the future, an icon of mobility, a last resort, a threatening or comforting object, a defence against a hostile world. It is an object into which affects and materialities are crammed and intertwined in interesting ways. I will use several perspectives to explore such processes. The first is Doreen Massey's evocative concept, *throwntogetherness* (2005). What kinds of objects and feelings are thrown together in the limited space of the suitcase? How do surprising mixes, intimacies and provocations emerge out of the confrontations of toothbrushes, clean underwear, pocketbooks, souvenirs and bottles of pills, together with an entire array of mixed feelings? The suitcase is also a throwntogetherness of the past, the present and the future, as the two examples in the films illustrate. In the case of *Emma*, packing a suitcase is a powerful statement of breaking up, a threat materialised into action: putting power behind the words, 'I am actually leaving you'. In *The Accidental Tourist*, the suitcase carries other emotional charges. It is a fortress against an uncomfortable feeling of being abroad, a reassuring object, but also a threat of future action that is mirrored in numerous hit songs about a packed suitcase ominously waiting in the hallway or under the bed.

The concept of throwntogetherness focuses on the ways in which diverse elements come to cohabit in a setting or a situation, often as unexpected neighbours – but in order to understand how these confrontations work, a few other theoretical tools are helpful. In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett analyses the agency and affective power of things, from a small collection of rubbish to a nationwide electricity grid, using Deleuze and Guattari's *assemblage* as an example of a 'confederate agency' (Bennett 2011). Another helpful approach can be found in the concept

of entanglement (see Ingold 2007 and Hodder 2012), the ways in which humans and things as well as sets of things become codependant. These three concepts approach questions of affect as potentially energising or intensifying in the everyday life of things, but by linking feelings and materiality there is also a far better chance of contextualising affect and not seeing it as free-floating energy. As the editors point out in the first chapter of this volume, the boundaries between affect and emotion are fluid. The suitcase is a good example of this fluidity and interweaving, which I analyse using mundane but broader concept of ‘feeling’, although at the end of the chapter I return to the question of affect and emotion.

My wider theoretical inspiration comes mainly from non-representational theory (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Vannini 2015), a tradition combining several theoretical and ethnographic perspectives that should rather be termed ‘more than representational theory’. It focuses less on codes, representations and discourses and more on everyday practices and skills, as well as sensibilities and affect (drawing on theories of materiality, performance and affect). In many ways, it is grounded in a phenomenological interest in commencing the analysis with the how rather than the why of social action. This interest does not, of course, exclude symbolic and semiotic aspects of material objects; the boundaries between the non- or pre-representational and the representational are constantly blurred. As I aim to show, the life of the suitcase illustrates ways in which the material and symbolic are constantly interwoven – a special form of entanglement.

The strength of non-representational theory lies in its constant experimentation with methods to capture the dimensions of actions which are hard to verbalise. This is often done through a bricolage approach, inviting dialogues with art, popular culture and fiction. The result is a strong interweaving of theory and methodological experimentation, in an attempt to find new ways of doing ethnography, and often learning from approaches outside academia, such as from artists who experiment with destabilising or provoking everyday life, for example (see the discussion in Thrift 2008).

I will use such a bricolage approach, mixing history, popular culture, field observations, art and fiction. I have, for example, found it fruitful to combine fieldwork with watching films, because this genre often opens up insights into the impact of artefacts and affects. Films can compress or stretch out time and space; they can distort, enlarge

or miniaturise themes, and make materialities stand out as important props or trendsetters.

The same goes for other forms of fiction. In the opening poem of her collection *Vagga liten vagabond* Eva-Stina Byggmästar (2010) imagines the home of a woman with wanderlust: the living room full of illuminated world globes, and suitcases everywhere. Are the suitcases packed and ready to go, or are they invitingly empty? They convey the mood that Scandinavians and Germans call ‘travel fever’ (*resfeber*, *Reisefieber*), that mixed feeling of anxiety and excitement, nervous anticipation and a longing for elsewhere (Löfgren 2015). To pack a suitcase is, in a sense, to start from zero; it is an empty vessel ready to be filled to the brim. Yet, at the same time, packing is an intensely cultural process, a competence people learn. The empty case is already full of pre-understandings and conventions. What to bring, and what not? And how to pack it? This is where material and technological potentials are entangled with travel logistics, with social and economic resources, and with hierarchies, feelings, cultural ideals and conventions.

To explore these entanglements, a historical perspective is helpful (which, by the way, is too often lacking in both non-representational and affect theory). Historical contrasts are needed to destabilise the taken-for-grantedness of the present. This goes especially for what Michel Foucault has called ‘objects without a history’, which led him to develop his genealogical approach (Foucault 1977). It is not a question of searching for origins but of looking at the open and messy situations in which new elements take shape, as for example in learning to pack for a journey in an age of mass travel.

When a new technology or practice emerges, it is often the focus of much experimentation and debate, and there is a high degree of visibility that later fades away. As new forms of travel such as rail and air opened up, there were bewildered but enthusiastic discussions about how to handle these forms of transit. How did one learn to be a rail or an air traveller, and what skills had to be developed? The historical perspective is also important to understand what James Gibson (1986) has called ‘affordances’: an object’s ‘potentialities for a particular set of actions’. Even if you never have seen a suitcase before, the handle reaches up for the hand, the lid wants to be opened and the container filled.

The suitcase has thus enabled, or blocked, some avenues of use and in my discussion of this evolution I will also bring to my aid the suitcase’s

minor siblings, the handbag and the wallet, which are just as much part of the choreography of travelling. Researching such items also means encountering both the frivolous and the harrowing – suitcases go everywhere.

To carry or not

Let me start by looking back to when there were no suitcases. There is a winding history of luggage. For the elite, packing was for centuries not much of a problem. Well into the nineteenth century, dignitaries still travelled with wagon loads. Back in the Middle Ages, and in early modern times, such a train and its escort was an important way of signalling wealth and power, a travelling showcase. In a sense, the European elites remained semi-nomadic, moving between different homes and continuously paying visits – this is the world as depicted in *Downton Abbey* and its like.

The elite never had to worry about the actual packing: trained servants anticipated their needs and took care of the abundance of chests, boxes and trunks. Porters and footmen stood ready along the route. For the mobile poor, it was less of a problem; they didn't have many belongings and had to make sure they took along with them what they could carry or drag along by themselves – from a bundle on a stick to a small chest.

This changed as mass travel by sea and rail accelerated in the late nineteenth century. The new travelling middle-class needed different kinds of trunks and cases. An entire industry of trunk makers developed, producing all sorts of containers for travel. The greatest innovator of them all was Louis Vuitton, who launched his firm in Paris in 1854. His early experience of packing for upper-class households gave him insights that were useful when he turned to developing new kinds of luggage for affluent travellers (see Pasols 2005). Vuitton's luggage-making career is interesting because it highlights the constant interweaving of choices of materials and innovative technologies, as well as questions of social status and fashion. It was no coincidence that he started his firm in the same period that saw the birth of the modern department store and the fashion system of *haute couture* in Paris.

As Guiliana Bruno (2002: 373 ff.) has pointed out, Vuitton's focus on fashion and women also put a focus on travel as a female possibility. His advertisements show women posing with new kinds of luggage, from shoe-

boxes to collapsible travel beds, or a *voyageuse* at her travelling desk, with portable writing table and library. But these collapsible innovations could still only work with an infrastructure of maids, porters and luggage vans – it was a freedom for the privileged traveller. This also meant that there was no need to make luggage light or streamlined. The elite never had to carry anything. Heavy materials such as wood and even iron were used to make sturdy trunks that could be stashed in steamboat or railway storage compartments. They often had to be carried by several persons. The drive for innovation was more towards producing specialised kinds of luggage. The ‘suite-case’, for example, started out as a flat container designed for suits, to be carried alongside the boxes for hats and collars (Gross 2014).

Vuitton and other producers opened up a new world of ‘travel objects’. It was not only the trunks themselves that were developed, but also the idea that there should be special stuff to enhance the travel experience, such as picnic sets, toiletries, etc. This is how the countess Jean de Pange describes her journey from Paris to her house in Dieppe, a four-hour train ride in 1900:

One freight car was not always sufficient when you consider that each servant (there were at least fifteen) had a trunk and my mother alone had thirteen ... She had some things sent ahead – her cushions, stools, foot warmers, screens, flower vases, and travel clock – as if we were going camping in the desert, when in fact the house in Dieppe was full of furniture ... we settled ourselves in as though we were going to China. We would take several baskets of supplies and an array of ‘travel’ utensils. Folding knives and forks, tumblers that could be flattened like opera hats, small bottles of salt, eaux de cologne, mentholated alcohol, fans, shawls, small rubber cushions, and an awful rubber chamber pot that made me feel sick just to look at it. (Pasols 2005: 137)

The modern suitcase was developed during the late nineteenth century to cater for the new kind of travellers, who, unlike the countess, had to carry their own luggage. As opposed to the trunk, it was designed to be carried to the side with one hand, which meant that it had to be slimmer and more rectangular than a trunk, and with a single handle. (This is why the traditional flat and rectangular ‘suite-case’ was used as the starting point.) New and lighter materials such as leather and canvas

over thin wooden frames were used. The suitcase also became personalised, an extension of the travelling body. People started decorating their suitcases with fancy hotel labels, and they also formed an attachment to 'my suitcase' – it became a sensitive object. The fashion dimension was accentuated in the process, although first and foremost the design had to fit with the new travelling body. Questions of balance, size and weight had to be solved in interaction with the new ways of carrying – a suitcase body. An American luggage factory even changed its name to Samsonite, evoking the biblical strength of Samson.

The material history of this piece of luggage is important, because it illustrates how a commodity emerges in dialogue between technological development, transport logistics and cultural conventions. Such entanglements resulted in the modern suitcase, which presented a special kind of material affordance: a limited container, which people had to adjust to. The suitcase emerged out of new travelling needs, but it also came to redefine such needs.

Only the absolute necessities

'When George is hanged, Harris will be the worst packer in this world', Jerome K. Jerome (1889/1957: 34) writes in his classic description of how three men prepare for their holiday on the river. Their endeavours to decide what to bring and how to squeeze it into the suitcases turn more and more chaotic.

Here we meet the new travelling middle-class for whom the question of luggage – what to bring along and how – becomes an important part of their preparations. This is especially marked in modern tourism, which has produced an endless flow of advice and debate on what should go into a suitcase. In a sense, packing became a micro-journey in itself. As things pile up in readiness, the whole journey is anticipated and there is a lot of mental travel going on. Do I really need this? What have I forgotten? The needs and potentials of the upcoming journey or vacation are materialised in the sorting and handling of all sorts of stuff. And the whole time this process is done in front of the old suitcase, invitingly empty – both enabling and restricting.

The need for travelling light leads to discussion about what to take – a cultural definition of necessities, which, of course, will look quite different according to people's social position and resources. The market

started to produce miniature and lightweight travel items. In the 1920s, Vuitton launched the small travel bag, the Keepall, which became one of the firm's classics. The 'overnight bag' gained ground, again creating a new standard. What does one need for a weekend away?

As the social base of international tourism broadened after the Second World War, the advice industry intensified. A Swedish guide, 'How to travel in Europe' (Strömberg 1951: 49 ff.), was aimed at new middle-class groups ready to take the brave step of going abroad. At last the Continent was open for leisure travel again. The back blurb promises that the book will give the reader 'a powerful travel fever!' Reading the long introduction on travel preparation is a little nerve-racking, there is so much to think about. Suitcases shouldn't be more than you can carry yourself and not look too fancy because this will make hotel porters 'more hungry for tips', the author states. He preaches the need for travelling light, but goes on to suggest lists of necessary items that cover several pages, from a miniature iron and a silk robe for walking to the bathroom in the hotel corridor, to an extensive medicine chest. Reading the long list of medicines and remedies (always bring extra toilet paper, it is a scarce commodity abroad), the reader might have second thoughts about daring to leave home.

Reinventing the wheel

Suitcase technology stayed very much the same until the advent of air travel called for even lighter luggage. To keep fuel costs down, it was important to limit luggage weight, and by the end of the 1930s, regulations emerged in the US that were often standardised around a maximum weight of 20 kilos, or 40 pounds. (This figure was seen somehow as representing a suitable amount of packing.) With the help of new materials, suitcases became lighter. The first aluminium case, made in Germany, was modelled on the classic body of the Junker aeroplane. Later, plastic took over. Although there had already been experiments with suitcases on wheels in the early 1900s, this technology did not really catch on until the 1970s when flying became a mass activity. The innovator of this development was actually an airline pilot (Gross 2014). Dragging stuff along instead of carrying it came to create new motor choreographies of travelling.

Airlines continued the fight against excess luggage. People are much cheaper to transport than luggage because they do their own handling, and unlike suitcases they are also potential consumers once aboard.

Accordingly, budget airlines took a punitive line on any type of luggage other than carry-ons, with the introduction of heavy charges. Today, new emotional scenes take place at the check-in, with people trying to squeeze their carry-ons into the metal grid of acceptable measurements. Being a ‘smart packer’ has increasingly become a question of kilos and centimetres.

Airlines love people like the seasoned traveller Ryan Bingham, the main character of a novel turned into a film, *Up in the Air* (2009). Played by George Clooney, Ryan is a consultant who spends much of his life airborne on his way to new assignments all over the US. His home is the airport lounge and hotel. In an early scene, he is travelling together with a young woman whom he is supposed to be training to be a consultant like him. Her induction begins when they meet in the departure hall where she is dragging a large suitcase and a carry-on clothes wardrobe. This won’t do, he tells her, and takes her to buy a cabin bag on wheels, and in the middle of the hall he begins to systematically sort out her stuff, putting most of into the wastepaper basket. Life is too short to check in luggage. Then he teaches her to scan the waiting lines to see where one can get through security the fastest and avoid the holidaying families and slow senior citizens. Step by step she is taught the routines that Ryan has turned into mere body reflexes.

As a business traveller and commuter, Ryan has created a fantastic flow. The camera captures his elegant choreography when he glides with minimal friction through the security and ID controls, the hotel lobbies and waiting lines with his light and fast-rolling suitcase. With the perfectionist’s delight, he swishes his gold and VIP cards, juggles the plastic trays at the security check, cutting corners, finding the fast lanes everywhere. Not only his clothes are wrinkle-free, his whole life is liberated from demanding relationships or duties. He loves this no man’s land, where you can always be in transit – travelling light. ‘Moving is living’ is his motto. Watching him gliding through space is to see a man with a habitus that has perfected the union of body and luggage.

Learning to pack

The history of suitcases shows how the size and form of luggage help people select and deselect. One sets out with an invitingly empty case, which soon begins to overflow. What should I pack? Only the necessities!

And what are they? Every item put into the case is briefly considered: will I need this, would it be good to bring this along, or fun ...? Skills of anticipation and planning become important, and such skills are learned and relearned during a long travel career.

Children start early, being allowed to pack their own miniature suitcases but then having their parents going through their stuff and telling them what they can or cannot take. In their own playworld, however, they can pack whatever they want. A story by the Swedish childrens' author Astrid Lindgren (1950) features a boy of four who is wrongly accused of taking his dad's favourite pen. He decides to take revenge by leaving the family and moving across the yard to the outhouse. He packs for his new life, carefully selecting the necessary items for this exodus: a favourite storybook, a small ball and a mouth organ. He is already fantasising about sitting out there alone on Christmas Eve surrounded by his belongings, playing a sad melody on his mouth organ. 'How they will miss me then!'

The Turkish author Orhan Pamuk (2006) remembers how he loved to unpack his father's suitcase after his dad returned from his travels, handling the familiar and unfamiliar items, taking in the fragrance of eau-de-cologne and other scents of foreign parts. Another man [quoted in Nippert-Eng 2011: 149] talks of the ways in which he still follows meticulously his father's style of packing; he is performing a ritualised tradition.

Other people get out of the packing habit and have to start learning again. In the film *As Good as it Gets* (1997), Jack Nicholson plays a writer with pronounced behavioural disorders. He summons his courage and invites a waitress at his favourite café (Helen Hunt) for a weekend trip. In the next scene, we watch them both packing nervously. 'You are, of course, shocked by being used again', she says to her old suitcase, hidden away on the top shelf. Time to pack, but what? What kind of weekend is this? 'There's no way to pack for this trip!' she exclaims as she weighs different garments in her hands. Meanwhile, the writer, with his obsessive-compulsive disorder, has made a detailed packing list with all items waiting in perfect order on the bed next to the suitcase. He surveys the piles like a commander inspecting his troops, preparing for battle.

The two scenes point to the performative dimension of packing; it is not just a routine but an event, sometimes heavily ritualised but always charged with affects as a long journey or simply a weekend trip is arranged through material objects. The suitcase is not just a container but a generator, providing shape and direction for the traveller's actions.

Gendered suitcases

To watch the writer and the waitress packing is also a reminder that this is a heavily gendered activity. In the history of modern travel, there is a long tradition of men belittling of women's packing as an irrational, emotional, and, above all, overflowing activity. In a visit to the lost property office at Euston station in 1849, a male observer was baffled by all the stuff left behind, especially the women's belongings:

How many little smelling bottles – how many little embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs – how many little musty eatables and comfortable drinkables – how many little bills, important little notes and very small secrets each may have contained, we felt that we would not for all the world have ascertained. (Richards and MacKenzie 1986: 309)

There is a long tradition of condescending male remarks about women who pack too much, who can't restrain themselves, which the sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2012) has explored in his study of the handbag. He points out that women, and especially wives and mothers, never pack just for their own needs. Reading his book I am reminded of the Moominmamma who always carries a reassuring handbag along, unlike the unfettered adventurer Moominpappa. Women have learned not only to anticipate their own needs but also those of others. When a mother packs for a family holiday she keeps adding stuff that is 'good to have', as she plans for all kinds of eventualities and mishaps. Paper handkerchiefs, plasters, painkillers, and other first-aid stuff, an extra towel, a corkscrew, maybe some plastic mugs, sunblock, and much more. Her suitcase carries a heavy responsibility and her husband cannot understand why she takes such a long time to pack – aren't you ready yet, darling?

In Hollywood movies, lone heroes travel without suitcases; it would look unmanly. When the suitcase on wheels was introduced, some male resistance to it was also noted. Dragging luggage along seemed a little feminine. A real Samson carries his case, and, if he is a true gentleman, that of his female companion too. Hollywood movies also illustrate another gendered divide. For the male Hollywood gaze, women's suitcases seem to hold a special fascination, as Michael Walker (2005: 277) has pointed out in his discussion of the film-maker Alfred Hitchcock.

What are they hiding, why do they carry a sexual charge and why are they a forbidden territory invaded by men who secretly go through their contents? But Walker also points out that the suitcase is used to signal a self-reliant and strong woman, able to take care of her own stuff and life.

Packing not for a weekend but for life

A different film shows a man packing his suitcase; meticulously he places all he needs in the case: clothes, toiletries, and finally a hairbrush. His movements are swift but orderly, he is in a hurry to leave Europe for Israel. The film is part of a campaign after the Second World War to get Jews to leave Europe with all its recent memories of the Holocaust, and help build the new state of Israel.

The use of a suitcase scene is no coincidence. The film seems in a silent dialogue with another situation packing for a journey into the new and unknown: at Block 5 in Auschwitz, there is a large display of the suitcases brought by Jewish victims. The Gestapo had instructed them to bring along a suitcase each, in order to create a reassuring feeling of a temporary move, and people were told to mark their luggage for later identification. The names are still there in block letters, some carry the extra label '*Waisenkind*': orphan. Inside these suitcases, packed in haste, were belongings brought along on a journey to a new life – a stay at a work camp, as most of the travellers thought. On arrival their suitcases were confiscated immediately, and when the liberators arrived in 1945 there were stacks of these suitcases, which had been emptied and the contents sorted for further use by the camp staff. Why is it that these piles of suitcases produce such strong emotional reactions among visitors? Unlike the heaps of skeleton parts or the cramped bunks in the barracks, the suitcases bring to the fore a personal destiny. They may have been emptied but they are still loaded with anguish, hope and bewilderment. Although they rest there silently, they communicate action, the hurried packing of a few cherished belongings.

The suitcases at Auschwitz belong to harrowing memories of packing for the millions of people forced from their homes as refugees or deportees in twentieth century Europe. Their stories are remarkably similar. Often there is a knock on the door, the militia or the police give the orders: get ready to leave, in an hour or tomorrow. Bring only a suitcase with the necessary things. Necessary for what? In other situations, there is

not even that much of a warning. In a panic people just throw anything into the suitcase. During the deportation of Estonians to labour camps in Siberia after the Second World War, people remember how some just started cramming stuff into the suitcase without any idea of what was needed. If the soldiers knocking were local militia, they occasionally gave a bit of advice. You should pack this but not that ...

But, again, it is the container in the form of the one suitcase that frames the preparations for the journey. All over the world battered suitcases are still being dragged along, people's belongings suddenly reduced to the items that could be squeezed into the case. It is not surprising that a book on refugee voices from Bosnia and Croatia bears the title *The Suitcase*, and in the texts suitcases appear in many ways. One woman remembers: 'When we rushed out of our homes into the city, perhaps forever, I took some of my favourite books, a checked vanity case, and undergarments.' She asks her mother: 'What did you bring?' – 'That which everyone needs, she says' (Mertus et al. 1997: 87). People remember what they forgot to pack in the frenzied hurry and what they managed to take with them. Another woman packed lots of warm clothes although it was the middle of the summer, but also Marcel Proust, the book of the *I Ching* and a favourite scarf. Reading Proust in exile, with the scarf resting under a cushion, a reassuring link with the past was created.

The most intimate side of exile is tied to luggage, the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić writes, as she looks at her luggage, 'my only true companions, a witness to my wanderings. The suitcases travel, go across borders, move in and out with me. If there is something I dream of, it is not a new home, but a new suitcase ... East, West, home is best, most people would agree. But the majority is always wrong. East, West, suitcase is best!' (Ugrešić 2007: 17).

Migrating suitcases

I'm watching Victor and Miguel pack. We have just returned from a shopping trip where they bought four gallons of water, three cans of beans, 11 cans of tuna, two cans of sardines, half a kilo of limes, two bags of tortillas, a loaf of bread, a bulb of garlic (to rub on their clothes as a defence against snakes), and a can of chilies. They are both trying to cram two gallons of water into

their backpacks that already are overloaded with food and clothes. Miguel tells me he has an extra pair of socks in case his feet get wet or he starts to get blisters from his uncomfortable knock-off Adidas sneakers. He has also packed a couple of black T-shirts that he says will help him avoid *la migra*. ‘It makes it harder for them to see us at night,’ he says ... (León 2012: 477)

The backpacks are the cheap camouflage or black ones you can buy from the vendors that make a good profit selling cheap stuff for migrants trying to cross the border into the US. In Jason León’s study of the material culture of illegal migrants, he shows how a set tradition of ‘what to carry in the backpack’ for this desert crossing has evolved based upon local hearsay and the stories of experiences exchanged between migrants, and the fact that most migrants can only afford cheap equipment like sneakers that rapidly fall apart. When Victor finally made the journey, he had to throw away everything in the backpack apart from the plastic water containers. He still keeps the backpack as a memento of that last successful trip.

There are hundred thousands of travellers like Victor, who pack for an illegal border crossing. For most of them, packing could not be more strategic; a negotiation of the absolute necessities, balancing between minimum weight and the maximum chances of survival. But, as Leon points out, migrants may be packing the wrong stuff. In the Mexican case, they carry blackened water containers and black T-shirts, because of the obsession with not sending out any dangerous signals, but later they discover that the water gets undrinkably hot and the body soaking wet under the fierce onslaught of the desert sun. Others may discover that their careful packing is no use at all when the middlemen rob them of their only belongings during the journey.

Suitcases or travel bags also follow different kinds of migrants across the borders. The nature of the journey is mirrored in the packing. There are people who commute between homes – to an overnight flat, a caravan, a hotel room away from home. Migrant labourers, transnational professionals, itinerant salespersons. What do they take along? Another category that also highlights ideas of what is needed to make a home from home is the children of divorced parents who alternate between mum’s or dad’s place. Ida Wentzel Winther (2015) has followed such children as they get ready to move again and pack their bags. Their packing tells

us a lot about tricky balancing acts and questions of belonging. She is observing a girl packing for the weekly switch between her parents' houses. Her hands are moving among things, hesitating, there is a lot of affect here. Where is home actually (ibid. 224)?

A special case concerns migrants returning home for holidays. Their suitcases need to be stuffed with gifts, with careful consideration given to what the people back home might expect, demand or need; and on the return journey, to what one wants to bring back to one's new home. Think of the masses of Chinese factory workers who go back to their villages for the New Year holidays with loaded suitcases (Chang 2009), or the many transnational migrants making return visits home. In a sense, what they are packing are social relations, but also, as Maja Povrzanović Frykman and Michael Humbracht (2013) have discussed, there is a flow of everyday objects connecting the two settings, which creates some kind of experiential continuity.

Transgressing borders

Transnational suitcases are open to inspection. One of Jean-Claude Kaufmann's informants, Brunette, is stopped by customs. The official begins to search her car. She has no problems with this, but all of a sudden he sticks his hand into her open handbag and starts rummaging. 'I turned ice cold, it was like he invaded my intimate sphere and without warning' (Kaufmann 2011: 138).

At security checks and border crossings, people know that their luggage may be searched by total strangers, and when that happens it often feels invasive. The last time it happened to me, I couldn't but be embarrassed as my chaotic packing was disclosed to the bystanders, with everything a mess.

Luggage searches are thus heavily charged with strong feelings. Here are two examples. The first features two British tourists in Scandinavia in the 1870s. Their train stops at the Norwegian–Swedish border:

Our two portmanteaus were seized upon and carried into the custom-house, where the station-master, in a very magnificent dress of light blue, with silver facings, a three-cornered hat on his head, and a sword by his side, was walking about with a piece of official chalk in his hand. We feared all our well-packed effects

were to be tumbled about by the rude hands of the custom-house people; but we were spared that trial. Either the station-master was in an amiable mood, or (very probable) our train was behind time, for after gazing benignly upon us, he asked P. if we were tourists, and being told that we bore that character, he mildly begged to know if we had anything contraband. On being informed that we possessed nothing illicit, he smiled a gracious smile, affixed a mark upon our things, and motioned to a porter to take them back to the luggage-van. (Arnold 1877: 246)

Mr Arnold was asked about contraband, but not about his identity, which was a minor matter in the 1870s. Contraband were objects which must not be carried across a border – in earlier times, this meant things like special luxury goods, political pamphlets, pornography; later it was drugs, alcohol and certain foodstuffs.

In the travel handbook from 1951 quoted earlier, the author has a detailed section on customs problems, which begins ‘thoughts about



Figure 6.1. All of a sudden your private life is opened up for inspection. Customs officials checking ferry travellers from Copenhagen, Denmark, in Malmö, Sweden, 1948. Copyright IBL.

customs make travellers terrified'. He then produces an impressive list of customs duties and currency regulations in Europe. 'How many gramophone records or how much coffee is one allowed to bring across the border? Don't forget that artworks are taxed according to the weight of the frame' (Strömberg 1951: 460).

Mr Arnold feared the invasion of the privacy of his suitcase, but his social standing protected him. Others may experience worse humiliations, such as the Nigerian art curator Okwui Enwezor (1996: 65) who describes his experience of the customs control at Charles de Gaulle airport, surrounded by other Third World migrants:

I hate being one of these people: the men and the women with their bundles, their world and dreams contained in bags and boxes long out of fashion. Even more, I loathe the pawing fingers of the coarse young French officer at Charles de Gaulle, his rudeness and sullen manner, his angry inferiority complex.

Enwezor felt the nonchalant hands moving through his belongings had a clear message: 'you are an inferior person'. People do not forget such charged situations. The customs official holding up object after object, asking intimidating questions with his 'rude' hands, as Mr Arnold puts it, or his 'pawing fingers' as Enwezor describes it.

In recent decades, the search is not so much for contraband but for terrorists. Over time, border controls became laxer, but then the new threats of terrorism once again made luggage a problematic issue. The security control turned into a needle's eye and a *zone nerveuse*. After 9/11 in 2001 the lists of forbidden items grew, and even the most mundane and peaceful objects took on a new and menacing aura. A Swedish museum began to collect objects confiscated at a major airport, and it is a baffling collection of nail files, corkscrews, scissors, combs and cigarette lighters. Later, even mineral water bottles and shampoo were confiscated. Tensions increased, and at Heathrow airport in 2007 signs warned travellers: 'Please be patient while we carry out important security procedures ... We will not tolerate threats, verbal abuse or violence.' As monitored and organised as the procedures at the security checkpoint are, the situation when travellers have been through it seems makeshift and chaotic. Businessmen fight for their dignity as they grab their belongings while trying to hold up their beltless trousers with one hand. People search

for somewhere to sit down to put their shoes back on as they attempt to reorganise all their things, put their keys and cash back into their pockets, the computer into its travel case.

A man talks of his suitcase contents spilling out at the airport in front of some people: 'it's not like I cared that people would see them, but they're like my things. So I feel attached to them in some way and it would make me nervous that anyone could see them because they were laying on the floor' (Nippert-Eng 2010: 120). He felt even more nervous as he started picking stuff up as quickly as possible. Every delay meant more embarrassment.

In situations like these, bystanders are turned into voyeurs, with a unique chance of viewing the private belongings of total strangers, and also, maybe, having their prejudices corroborated. There are, for example, a number of cases in which travellers of the nineteenth century have their national stereotypes confirmed by observing others being scrutinised. Here is a Swedish academic in 1844 watching Englishmen open their luggage: 'How orderly, clean and neat in comparison with the trunks of the German and the confusion and chaos which characterised their packing, *Allgemeine Zeitung*, unclean shirts, books, brushes, jars and cartons, entangled in a crazy and dirty mess' (quoted in Arvastson 2008: 2).

The suitcase in the attic

After a busy life, many suitcases have stopped travelling: they are resting in attics, collecting dust and in the process they become a new kind of container. One such case belongs to Dmytre Zrchuk, which when it was opened contained 199 items: fourteen paper patterns for cut-outs of various animals, a coloured print of the Madonna and Child from Innsbruck, a paisley scarf and three peach-coloured towels, an alarm clock, a hand carved wooden dog, a bronze model of the Washington Monument, a photo album, a sewing kit, a silver fork and spoon, twenty-six postcards ... books, dictionaries and pamphlets in German, Ukrainian and English. Zrchuk's suitcase was found in the attic of the Willard State Hospital in New York. When this mental institution was closed in 1995 and demolition crews moved in, two female employees remembered that there was some stuff stashed in the attic of the Sheltered Workshop Building. When they managed to pry the door open they encountered an awesome sight: crates, trunks, hundreds of standard suitcases, doctor's bags, and many-

shaped containers were all neatly arranged under the watchful eyes of the pigeons. All 427 pieces were taken to a museum. It took years to go through and catalogue the contents. This was luggage that patients had packed neatly as they prepared themselves for a stay at the hospital. They had carefully chosen what they thought they would need and what items they would like to bring along, from family albums to elegant clothes. Little did they know that they would never open them and that many of the inmates would spend the rest of their lives in this institution, while their cases lay forgotten in the attic (Penney and Stastny 2009).

Some travelled light, like Lawrence Marek, a Galician immigrant and window washer from New York. He arrived at the hospital in 1937 and his suitcase contained only a pair of extra shoes, two shaving mugs and brushes, and a pair of suspenders. Maybe he packed for a short stay in 1937, but he remained in the hospital until his death in 1968. Others brought almost an entire life with them. Margaret Dunleavy, a nurse who arrived in 1941, had the most items of all in her trunk. It contained dishes, pots and pans, kitchenware, a nurse's uniform, hundreds of negatives and photographs, a pair of ice skates and much, much more. She was ready to set up a home from home, with all her cherished belongings. Over the years, these possessions gathered dust in the attic, frozen images of a journey planned, with a selection of necessary or beloved items. All they would need for their trip ...

There are other forgotten suitcases in attics around the world. In 1923, Olga from Gammelnäs in Sweden went to America and worked as maid in a wealthy Boston family, while her fiancé Erik stayed at home, fishing and farming. Olga and Erik had to keep up their relationship through letters for many years, bridging two very different worlds. When she came back sixteen years later, they raised a family and her Boston savings helped to buy the small farm they had longed for. Olga died young, and after Erik's death in 1993, their daughter found her mother's old American trunks stowed away in the attic. They were filled with American clothes, embroidered silk blouses, stylish dresses, white gloves, Bakelite handbags and other wonders of 1930s fashion, as well as untouched cosmetics from nail polish to Luxor Complexion Powder, together with Boston theatre programmes, souvenirs and photos. These were belongings that a smallholder's wife in Gammelnäs had no use for, and could not show off back home. The trunks stayed closed up there in the attic, encapsulating a time that had been, but mattered little after her

return from the exotic world ‘over there’. All of a sudden, the daughter encountered a life unknown to her.

The life and labour of suitcases

The luggage in the attic is a reminder of the different life histories of things. One aspect which makes the sight of the Auschwitz suitcases so harrowing is the knowledge of the many earlier and joyful memories attached to them: a holiday at the grandparents, or a vacation by the sea. Affects can catch people unaware when the lid is opened, eliciting a wide array of sensations and feelings, drawing on personal memories or fantasies about the former owner.

In such ways, the suitcase also demonstrates the powerful entanglement of material and symbolic dimensions. With the gradual personalisation of luggage in the forms of the favourite suitcase or handbag, such items also come to carry a weightier symbolism. All kinds of meanings are projected unto them and they may take on a life as metaphor (‘living out of a suitcase’ or ‘a baglady’) or even end up as a rather empty symbol, as when old battered suitcases are transformed into decorative elements in home interiors or shop windows, where their power to produce an atmosphere of cosmopolitan adventure is put to work.

The personal bond between person and object is created above all by the constant handling, the packing and unpacking. ‘To live out of a suitcase’ is not just a metaphor but a real experience for many. A young American woman I interviewed puts it like this:

I feel I have been living out of a suitcase for so many years. Just like my friends, always moving between temporary lodgings and never really settling down. The case is always there, half-unpacked under the bed, signalling a state of impermanence and makeshift arrangements. The day it is emptied and put away in the attic, I know I have finally settled.

In a way, an old suitcase, which has been through a long life of packing and unpacking is a good example of what Sara Ahmed has called stickiness: ‘affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects’ (Ahmed 2011: 29). The suitcase is an object attracting strong feelings. When Orhan Pamuk’s father died, he

was left with a full suitcase, as the daughter in the example above was. Although he had opened it so often as a child, he found it was hard for him to open it now, it seemed to be overflowing with feelings. Was he ready to confront his father's life?

Why can it be so challenging to open someone else's luggage? What makes a suitcase or a handbag such a special container of stuff and mixed feelings? It is a special kind of bounded universe. Analysing the life of the handbag, Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2012) asks how mundane items in the supermarket or on a table, from tampons and underwear to corkscrews and pocketbooks, are just this, everyday stuff – but collected together in a suitcase or a bag, they acquire a new aura of intimacy and often also of secrecy. It is a throwntogetherness that may turn into a personalised version of 'me'. 'Through what they choose to carry and not to carry with them, participants support specific narratives of self', as Christena Nippert-Eng (2011: 147) puts it in her discussion of the wallet. Similarly, suitcase contents are a material distillation of a life, a home or a style of living. It is no coincidence that artists often use the suitcase as an identity container ('who could be the owner of this assemblage' or 'open your suitcase and I will tell you who you are'). The contents can be turned into a micro-biography – this material collection is actually me.

By being included in the select company of other objects, things may acquire a special aura, turning into talismans. A small stone from a holiday beach, a couple of photographs, a poem or a wrinkled letter. This process is enhanced by having them close and handling them ('I just can't be without them'). One traveller kept a small, dog-eared card with a prayer for starting out on a journey (Nippert-Eng 2010: 111) – 'It is nice to have', he said. But the longer such items are left in the travel bag or wallet, the more important they may become. They turn into more of a necessity than many other essentials. Even the illegal immigrants crossing the desert with only the absolute minimum often carry a small image of a saint.

A refugee from Estonia in the 1940s (interviewed for the Nordic Museum Archive) threw an old, rusty pair of scissors into his suitcase before his hasty departure. When he unpacked the case in Sweden, he realised that this item was now the only thing he owned that had belonged to his father and in the process a mundane object turned into something else that was overflowing with affect.

Margrit Wettstein has discussed similar processes in her study of Jewish refugees – the author Nelly Sachs, for example, who escaped with her mother on the last civilian flight out of Berlin in 1940. She crammed a few clothes and some personal items, a few photos, her father’s military decorations and a beloved childhood album of bookmarks into her suitcase. ‘With the Gestapo waiting it was what you put into your pockets that came to remain of your home’ (Wettstein 2009: 12 ff.).

The strong affects of suitcase contents are created by several processes of throwntogetherness and entanglement. First of all, an item inside the case has gone through a process of selection, it has been deemed worthy of being included among the necessities. Secondly, the size of the suitcase limits the number of things. It is a relatively small and clearly bounded collection, which may make it more powerful (unlike heaps of things). Inside the suitcase, things are joined into a ‘confederate agency’, or a vibrant assemblage as Jane Bennett has put it (2011: 23), a theme I will explore in the following.

Unattended luggage will be destroyed by the authorities

The summer heat is quivering over a rural railway station. On the empty platform stands a suitcase with a bouquet of drooping flowers on top. The luggage attracts attention, like a materialised form of travel fever. Who does it belong to? What’s inside it? From the shade by the station building, other travellers start to fantasise about it. This is the captivating start of a story by the Swedish author Stig Dagerman (1945: 1), written long before unattended suitcases in transit spaces became a danger signal.

What are suitcases good for and what are they good at? I have discussed what suitcases can do, and what people can do with them, in very different contexts. They are mundane objects, dragged along, but they are also magic and sensitising tools and represent a number of container skills: separating, uniting and compressing. I began by referring to Doreen Massey’s evocative but somewhat elusive concept of throwntogetherness and have used the suitcase to develop the analytical potential of this term further. The suitcase creates special conditions for such confrontations between past, present and future as well as between objects with very different charges, and to understand that we must look at processes of entanglement.



Figure 6.2. To be surrounded by your own luggage can create a private comfort zone while waiting for the train. People arrange and rearrange, open and close their bags and suitcases – a constant interaction. Photo: Orvar Löfgren, St Pancras Station, London, 2009.

As I have shown there are strong emotional attachments between travellers and their suitcases. The case may be charged with nostalgic memories and moods of belonging, it may be surrounded by an aura of

adventure och secrets, but there are also strong dimensions of affect. The reassuring look at the contents before departing, the feeling of security when gripping the handle during the journey, the suspense of opening a closed, dusty trunk up in the attic, or vague sensations of unease and exposure at border controls or security points.

First of all, as objects are mixed and become entangled, a cell phone charger chord lovingly wrapping itself around a box of pills or a shirt, new constellations are formed; the beloved notebook is in strange company, squeezed in among the dirty socks. The suitcase turns into a cultural container by this throwtogetherness, enclosing and joining together stuff that may be seen as a personal micro-universe. Jane Bennett points out that an assemblage owes its capacity for agency through the ‘shi’ effect. She is using a Chinese term, which describes something that is hard to verbalise,

the kind of potential that originates not in human initiative but instead results from the very disposition of things. *Shi* is the style, energy, propensity, trajectory or élan inherent to a specific arrangement of things. (Bennett 2011: 35)

Feelings and materialities begin to work together through these proximities and are confronted, sometimes unexpectedly; objects are emotionally charged in novel ways. And this goes for both the carefully planned packing and the stuff that is just thrown in more or less randomly.

Secondly, the suitcase as both a physical and cultural container brings key ideas into play – the necessary, the essential, the indispensable, the optional, the superfluous – in very concrete ways. Trying to decide whether to make do with or without this, objects are weighed in the hand. As a strong device of affordances, the suitcase has room for both constraint and potential. During its history, it has become a measurement for ‘enough’. Over a century, the conservative form of the suitcase created a special standard. Comparing suitcases, handbags and wallets tells us about such spatial constraints, but also about cultural ones: packing each of them is done according to different genres. One important difference is that the wallet, and especially the handbag, is more rarely emptied and reorganised. Stuff starts to sediment in there, which may create stronger processes of entanglement.

Another important dimension is the throwtogetherness of the past, the present and the future. For every object selected or left behind, a potential future is constructed: this weekend, my job trip, a family vacation, or a life-changing migration. Packing for possibilities, eventualities, disasters, or for dreams of fun. The business traveller who adds a packet of condoms or a seductive nightgown is certainly not planning an extramarital affair, but then 'you never know'. The suitcase starts looking ahead, but also backwards. People pack continuities. What elements of an earlier life demand to be taken along on a new journey? In this sense, packing can become a ritual of incantation, an attempt at controlling the future.

There is also the question of time frames, as I have shown. What is packed? Temporal or permanent lives, real or fantasised? Some of the cherished stuff bought during a journey and carried home turns out to have no place there; its special aura evaporates as the suitcase is unpacked. Feelings that get packed may turn out to be ephemeral or 'sticky'.

Thirdly, the union between traveller and suitcase is created above all through constant handling. This entanglement or union between traveller and luggage can be observed in several situations. There are the constant routines of packing and unpacking, where deft hands, planning minds and an empty suitcase on the bed work together. A process of habituation is at work here. Think, for example, of the veteran long-distance commuter packing his or her suitcase every Sunday evening, creating a kind of *rite de passage* which marks the break away from the family. Who is leaving? Just me and my suitcase.

Luggage also does things to the travelling body, slowing people down or making them comfortable (Bissell 2009). Travellers are constantly lifting, dragging, resting. At railway stations and airports, I have spent time watching this interaction. The reassuring rummaging through a handbag, for example – visiting a familiar world in an alien context. People cling to their luggage, arrange it as a small fortress around themselves while they wait. Here, the suitcase works rather like a transitional object, bridging the owner and the alien outside world in Winnicott's sense (1971). When people rest with their suitcases by the side, they seem like little children patiently standing close, sometimes held in a firm grip: 'unattended luggage will be removed by the authorities'.

Dimensions like these illustrate the ways in which suitcases handle a number of polarities in people's lives: private/public, past/future, personal

idiosyncrasies versus shared cultural conventions and ideas. Packing and unpacking a suitcase means constantly negotiating such tensions and paradoxes. There is a constant entanglement here of material practicalities, affects and cultural projections, so evident in the turning of the suitcase into something private and very personal.

Out of the throwtogetherness of objects, memories and intentions in the suitcase, special moods as well as quickly passing affects arise when the case is opened and items handled. There is the melancholy of a suitcase in the attic, with its sense of unfulfilled dreams or nostalgia for times gone by; there is the optimism or anxiety of packing for a future life or short journey. Or, as Christena Nippert Eng (2010: 156) says about opening a purse:

Each time one opens one's wallet or purse, the sound of the ocean may be heard. There is room for agency, for individual preferences, practices and other idiosyncrasies in these small islands of privacy.

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