

Debris of the border: seeing, and seeing with, objects discarded by migrants

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Abstract

This presentation analyzes the social life of objects left behind by present-day migrants and rescuers in the European border zone. I explore how the objects – for example, life jackets, or pieces of wood originating from migrant boats in Lampedusa (Italy) – generate affective and political responses depending on where and how they are found and displayed, and who sees them. I examine how their cultural and political significance changes.

I compare the display of objects in three places: a boat cemetery in Lampedusa that has become a site for so-called dark tourism; the activist collection PortoM, where the objects become testimony of fatal bordering; and the Galata Maritime Museum in Genova where the objects are displayed in the context of an exhibition on Italian emigration. In addition, I analyze a project by the Italian Archivio Memorie Migranti (AMM) to conserve objects. The AMM treat the objects as someone's property while at the same time acknowledging their cultural and historical value.

My analysis of the places and exhibitions is informed by interviews with curators, and by my seeing the objects and walking through the exhibitions with people who experienced dangerous border crossings. Such participatory method of *thinking and seeing with* helps to refract my own gaze, and it helps me to understand how objects are animated as they are being seen. While symbolizing suffering by means of objects (such as shoes, or suitcases) is a well-established practice in museums dedicated to genocides, memorializing an ongoing mass death raises issues of solidarity. What kinds of politics, relationships and identities emerge when objects are exhibited and seen as testimonies of dangerous border crossing?