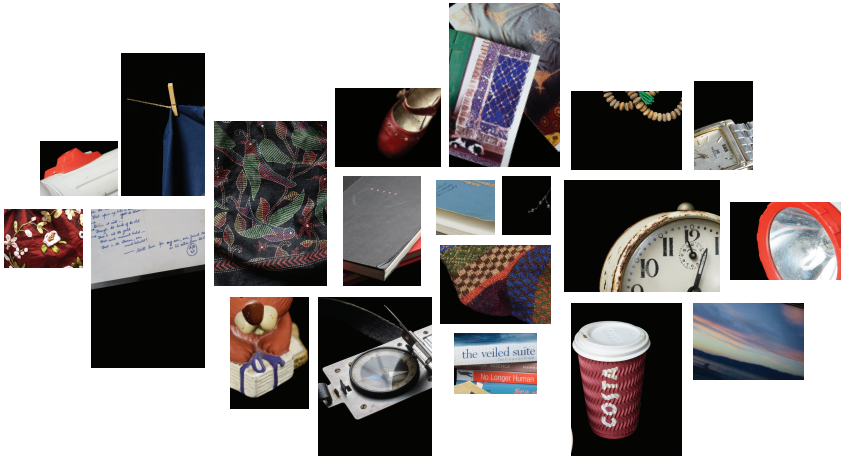




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What We Brought with Us

Curated by
Vanessa Agnew and Annika Roux

Organized by
University Alliance Ruhr

Photography by
Jobst von Kunowski

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Exhibition at Goethe-Institut New York
October 18th – November 15th, 2023

Academy in Exile supports scholars and cultural producers at risk and advances academic freedom through its fellowship program. *What We Brought with Us* presents images of objects carried by some of Academy in Exile's fellows when they fled from their countries of origin to Germany where they were hosted by University of Duisburg-Essen, Freie Universität Berlin, Forum Transregionale Studien and Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) Essen.

This exhibition was developed by Academy in Exile, supported in North America by University Alliance Ruhr, University of Cincinnati, and Goethe-Institut, and shared here with concern for those who are forced to live in exile as a result of oppression by authoritarian regimes around the world.

Introduction

The exhibition *What We Brought with Us* presents the belongings of people with exile backgrounds who have held fellowships at Academy in Exile (AiE) in Berlin and Essen.

The exhibition represents the complexities faced by those who experience flight from a country of origin, exile elsewhere, and often significant forms of border violence on their journeys in an era of unprecedented state securitization targeting migrants and refugees. At the same time, the role of art in society and the role of museums, galleries,

and public spaces, accessible to a broad public, offer important counterpoints in telling alternative stories of lives and futures. The present time of widespread war, violence, and crisis has made artists and other cultural producers all the more vital in interpretation and meaning-making. In this complex context, Academy in Exile provides an important space for respite, reflection, collaboration, and creation.

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The power of visual arts to affect the viewer, the participant, the public, is exemplified in the art produced by refugees and displaced persons, as well as by other artists whose work engages with the issues of violent borders and human displacement. Philosophers including Deleuze and Massumi suggest that the arts produce bodily affects, including on the nervous system; this intensity experienced by those engaging with artworks is in contrast to the more formal intentionality of representation. Indeed, contemporary visual culture, in the many forms it takes, is understood as impactful for the immersive experiences it produces and, importantly, for often defying the constraints of language and the specific cultures and values contained within a particular state.

Art is at once transcendent and immanent. The visual arts at times transport us to unexpected realms, while also invoking a “place-ness” of living and remaining. The artist and critic Hito Steyerl embraces this complexity of artistic practice. Yet she also reminds us that the contemporary war machines take particular pleasure in destroying cultural objects and artwork, as seen in the deliberate strategies of targeting cultural artifacts by

ISIS and the Taliban, and in the material and immaterial culture currently under attack by Russian forces in Ukraine.

In recent years, many of the large art annuals or biennials have featured art by people with a refugee background as key aspects of the curation. For example, the Sydney Biennale of 2018, curated by Mami Kataoka, with the theme *SUPERPOSITION: Equilibrium & Engagement*, referred to overlapping positions. Many of the featured artists in this biennial come from First Nations or refugee backgrounds. For example, the work of Brook Andrew centers on decoloniality, scrutinizing the dominance of Western colonial narratives. His work focuses on memories held in objects and in traditional museum and archive collections. The Kurdish artist Rushdi Anwar examines the materiality of experiencing genocide, dispossession, and exile through dialogue. Also featured was the Chinese exiled artist Ai Weiwei’s series of interconnected works that focus on human displacement and flight from violence. A central piece is a 60-meter-long inflatable boat and figures made of black rubber. The Chinese factory that made the work for Ai also manufactures the precarious vessels used

by thousands of refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Ai also features a wallpaper of photographs taken on an iPhone while making the documentary film *Human Flow* (2017) as well as four video works focused on refugee sea journeys.

The recent *documenta fifteen* in Kassel features the work *Border Farce-Sovereign Murders-Alien Citizen*, a video artwork by the lumbung artist Safdar Ahmed in collaboration with Kazem Kazemi, Alia Ardon, Can Yalçinkaya, and Kian Dayani. Kazemi is an Iranian refugee who was incarcerated in Australia's offshore prison camp on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, for six years. This video work documents parts of his life, looking at how the other/outsider is represented historically and aesthetically.

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The exhibition *What We Brought with Us* includes eighteen objects carefully selected and brought with people from the countries they fled. While the objects may be ubiquitous items able to be acquired almost anywhere, their significance goes beyond the utility or everyday quality of the object. A plastic torch, a mobile phone, or a paper coffee cup may not appear unique, yet in the storytelling of the exiled person who selected a particular object to keep and hold dear through the trajectory of hasty and often dangerous journeys to exile, such everyday objects are imprinted with deep memories and meaning unique to the holder. Some objects, such as the ultrasound of a child *in utero* or a journal written during the journey into exile, are indeed singular and irreplaceable.

The social theorist Sara Ahmed describes how emotions such as happiness are often expressed through objects. It is at the very point of making or creating that objects often gain prominence and meaning, taking on a significance beyond their utility or obvious (monetary) value. Object relations

are heightened in the experiences and agonies of fleeing from home and navigating a place in exile. When fleeing home, a precious object holds memories, social relations, and perhaps also potential for imagining the future.

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The objects included in this exhibition are building new kinds of archives. These are often qualitatively different from the traditional archives of the state and its institutions—instead, people with exile backgrounds are creating works from a unique standpoint and voice.

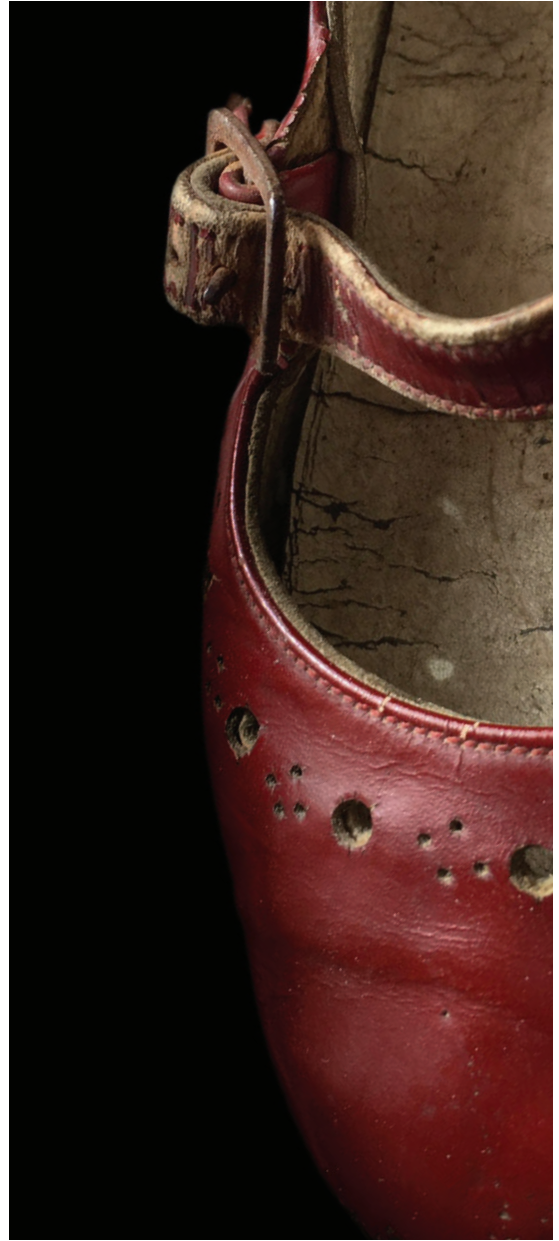
Claudia Tazreiter

**What We
Brought
with Us**



Child's shoe

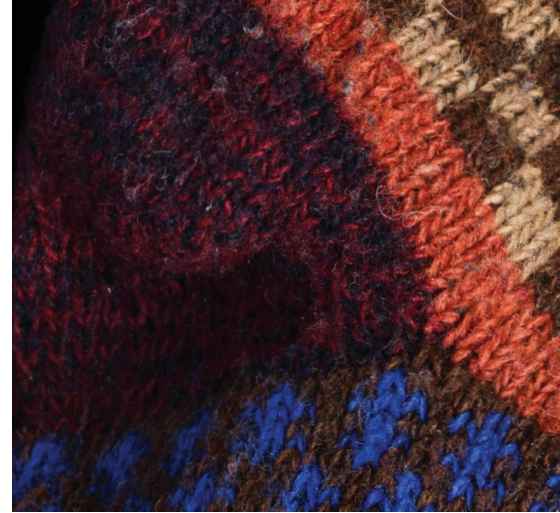
The shoe belonged to me when I was a little girl. I found it among my mother's belongings when she died. When I went into exile, it was one of the few things I took as a memento of her. The other shoe is lost.

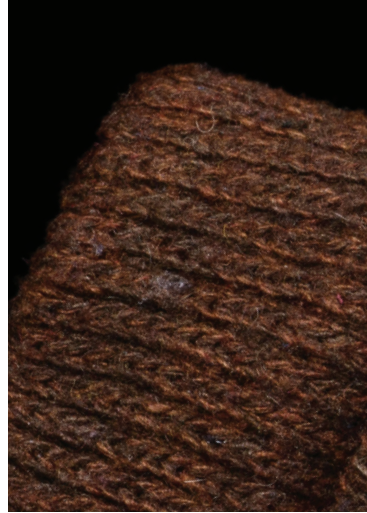


Sock

Some time ago, a dear friend from London sent me a nice pair of socks as a gift. One day, when I was packing up for a trip to Geneva, I could find only one of the socks. No matter how much I searched, the other one did not appear. Later, it transpired that the missing sock was in my hometown, Istanbul, apparently forgotten there during a visit. Today, one of the socks is in Essen and the other in Istanbul. I feel that I'm not so unlike these socks myself.

- Fırat Erdoğan

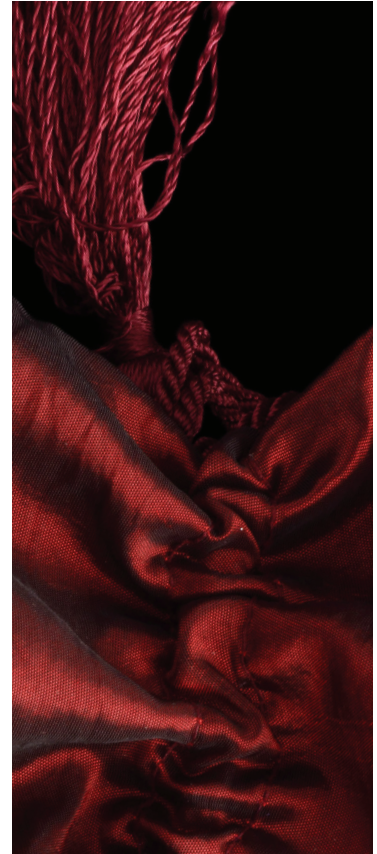




Venetian

silk purse

I thought I might be arrested at the airport in Islamabad. I put my travel documents in this fancy purse and flashed it around at immigration. The officials started whispering to one another, “Why does she keep her things in such an expensive purse?” They barely glanced at my travel documents and escorted me to the VIP lounge for tea while I waited for my flight.





Keypad

phone

This is the phone I brought with me when I left Myanmar last year. I kept it because it's a poignant reminder of life under military rule. After the coup of February 1, 2021, many people, including me, had to buy keypad phones. Most people use smartphones to access the internet and social media, and so switching to keypad phones would not be our choice. We are forced to use them although they have smaller screens and fewer technical features. Using these kinds of phones hasn't really made our lives which are under constant physical and digital surveillance that much safer. Popular social media platforms and texting apps like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Messenger are banned and have to be used with virtual private networks (VPNs) that most, if not all, of us once knew nothing about. VPNs are only installed on the smartphones we keep at home. There are many reports of the security forces viewing people carrying keypad phones with suspicion and ordering them to produce the smartphones they actually use.



Notebooks

A friend gave me one of these notebooks as a present. I brought it with me to Berlin simply because it happened to be the journal I was keeping at the moment. I recall jotting stuff down on the plane without being even dimly aware of the significance that it would later hold for me. The rest of my journals are still in Ankara, lying in a dusty drawer in our apartment. I take some pleasure in thinking of them, their pages yellow and the ink faded, as if they were crafting a quiet place for themselves in Turkey.





Books

When the protests started in Syria, I moved to Delhi. Then Muslims were targeted at the university, and I fled without papers to Jordan. It was hard to choose which books to pack. The day I left for Berlin, it was Edward W. Said's birthday, so I said to myself, "Let me take those." The books used up my luggage allowance. Now my library is scattered around the world.



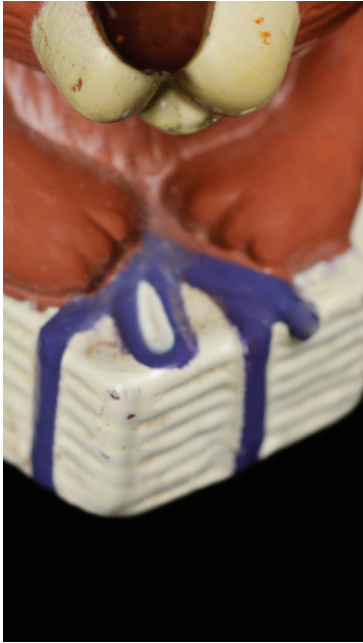


Ultrasound

When we set off, this ultrasound was the only object we had that belonged to our unborn daughter. Our journey did not end when we arrived in a safe country, but rather months later when she was born. When we first took her healthy form in our arms, it was only then that we could say, "Here we are." More than for us, this journey was for you, our precious daughter. As a letter from you to us and from us to you, this ultrasound was the only thing that we couldn't leave behind.

Toy bear

At the age of six, I become a homeless child. One day during my scavenges, I found this bear on a garbage heap. That was in the late '90s, and from then on, he has accompanied all my steps. He was with me when I left my Roma community, when I obtained my Masters in Media and Communication Studies, when I had my same-sex marriage, and when I defended my doctoral dissertation as well. More than thirty years later, I showed the toy to my husband. Ever since we met, he has called me Miś, which means “bear” in Polish. It was he who noticed that the bear is sitting on a pile of newspapers. He said, “Miś, it is you!”



Dupatta

I consciously packed this dupatta. My grandmother, my mother, and my aunts all wore wide dupattas. The dupattas were scented differently, though. All of them might wear the same pattern and color, yet one could detect the difference. My grandmother's always has a peculiar mustardy smell, my aunt's a bit nutty, and my mother's smells of something that I have not been able to decipher. Perhaps it's the smell of love. I carried this wide dupatta to remind myself of the smell of love that awaits me somewhere.







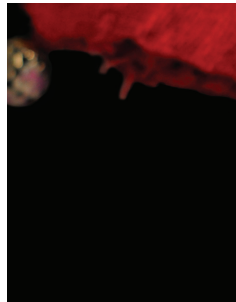
Torch

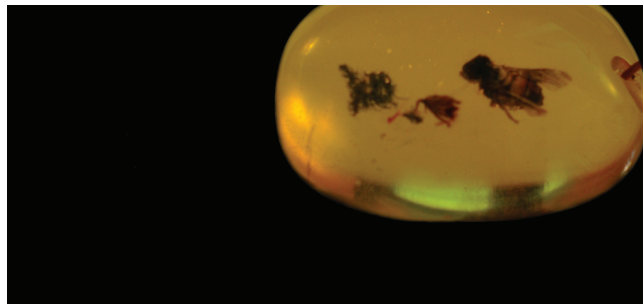
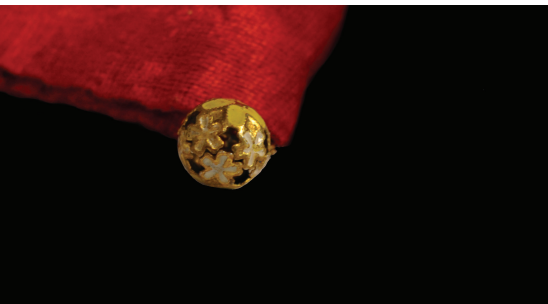
My grandfather gave me this torch when I left home. I was only eleven, and he gave it to me so I could find my way in the dark. After the government crackdown in Turkey, I had to leave the country. I took the torch as a memento of my grandfather when he died. He was my favorite person.



Amber with embedded insects

Whenever I pack my suitcase to move to another country, a country about which I know almost nothing, I toss this necklace into the corner of my bag. It's been there for more than a decade and seen six countries. Am I attached to it? Not really! It neither signifies anything nor even conjures up a particular memory. I only touch it once before departure when I'm packing, and one other time when I arrive at my destination. It has become a banal personal ritual. It serves as a tactile reminder that I've entered a new country and left one more behind. The first time I held it in my hand as a gift, it brought to mind the cruelty of containment. Now it conjures up the state of being always on the move. I like having it, though. It's a constant reminder that home is yet to come and that some people have to move fast enough to stay put.





Glasses stand

I bought this nose-shaped glasses stand in April 2015 during our visit to Yerevan for the centenary of the Armenian Genocide. The nose belongs to Yeghishe Charents, one of the greatest poets and political activists of Armenia. Born in Kars, Charents sought a *yergir* (homeland) in his works as a way of healing the traumatic loss of home. Here, this object—which, back in our house in Turkey, used to be a souvenir from Armenia—gained significance for us as a symbol of hope that we could make a new home in exile.



Queer flag

I got this flag from the Jewish section of Gay Pride. I marched joyfully, but fascism is rampant in Poland, and a bill in Parliament goes so far as to actually ban such events. In fact, they are referred to as "Equality Marches." Equality is precisely what my country is lacking right now. Yet the joy of rebuilding Jewish, feminist, and queer Lublin has not been abandoned altogether, nor have I been crushed by persecution at the hands of Poland's minister for education and science. Lublin was once a hub of Jewish, Ukrainian, Protestant, socialist, and atheist thought, and outstanding queer writers went about their work. Just think of lesbian writer Narcyza Żmichowska, author of Gothic novels in the nineteenth century, or Józef Czechowicz, gay poet of the interwar avant-garde! I took this flag with me to Berlin so as to recall the pluralism that is under threat in Poland. I dream of intercultural hospitality returning to my city, my country, the planet.





Kitschy photo

When I came to Germany, I planned on staying just five days. Now it's day 1,653 in exile, but who's counting? As a joke, my friend sent me this photo of where I used to live. It's so kitschy. When you look at it, you have to laugh. You can't get emotional.



Coffee cups

I had coffee with a friend I hadn't seen in a long time. We drank from disposable cups, but I kept them anyway. They've traveled with me from country to country. I didn't know if I'd see my friend in two or three years, or ever again, so I preserved these cups. War turns human beings into disposable things.





Fur

This is a piece of fur from my dog. I have this one shirt with me that I have never worn since I left the country. One day, I took a closer look at it and saw the fur of my dog on it. I felt that this is the only memory of him that came all the way with me. I put it in a container and kept it with me. I really miss him.





Vanessa Agnew

Vanessa Agnew was Professor in Anglophone Studies at Universität Duisburg-Essen until 2023 and is now in the Faculty of Cultural Studies at Technische Universität Dortmund. Agnew is also Honorary Professor in the Research School of Humanities and the Arts at The Australian National University, and Associate Director of Academy in Exile. Agnew's *Enlightenment Orpheus: The Power of Music in Other Worlds* (Oxford, 2008) won the Oscar Kenschur Prize and the American Musicological Society's Lewis Lockwood Award. The recipient of research grants from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and German Academic Exchange Service, Agnew co-edited *Settler and Creole Reenactment* (Palgrave, 2010), *Criticism 46* (2004) and *Rethinking History 11* (2007), *Refugee Routes* (transcript, 2020), *The Routledge Handbook of Reen-*

actment Studies (Routledge, 2020), and *Reenactment Case Studies* (Routledge, 2023). Agnew is PI on grants from Mellon Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and Allianz Foundation to support Academy in Exile. In 2022, Agnew launched *Ostrakon* to publish articles on forced migration and climate issues. Co-curated exhibitions include *Right to Arrive* (Canberra, 2018), *Fixing What's Broken* (Berlin, 2023), and *What We Brought with Us* (Re:Writing the Future Festival, 2021; German Literature Archive Marbach, 2022; Goethe-Institut New York and University of Cincinnati, 2023). Agnew's *Wir schaffen das – We'll Make It* (Sefa Verlag, 2021) has been translated into Ukrainian, Arabic, and Farsi. Agnew's current project is *λεῖμμα (leïmma): Remnantal Responses to Flight*.

A black and white portrait of Annika Roux, a woman with long dark hair and glasses, smiling slightly and looking towards the right. She is wearing a dark-colored button-down shirt. The background is a plain, light color.

Annika Roux

Annika Roux is completing a bachelor's degree in media and communication studies at Freie Universität Berlin, while also pursuing a master's degree in Romance literature with a focus on Spanish and Portuguese philology. She was responsible for the creative realization of the exhibition *Lorca – Views on a Global Reception* at the Spanish Embassy (2019) and Instituto Cervantes Frankfurt (2019), and the technical realization of a series of talks entitled *Students Read Contemporary Spanish-Language Literature*, directed by Susanne Zepp. She studied furniture and object design at the Universidad de las Américas in Santiago, Chile. Since 2019, she has been a member of the production team at Academy

in Exile, where she has managed the website and contributed to conference organizing, the e-learning video series, and the layout of publications such as Academy in Exile's short-form imprint, *Ostrakon*. Additionally, Roux is the co-curator of the exhibition *What We Brought with Us*, first shown digitally as part of the Re:Writing the Future Festival (2021) and subsequently at the German Literature Archive Marbach (2022), the University of Cincinnati, and the Goethe-Institut New York (2023). Since February 2023, she has also worked at Freie Universität Berlin as a student advisor in the Institute of Romance Philology.



Jobst von Kunowski is a visual artist and photographer. He studied fine arts in the department of photography and painting at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig, Germany. In his work, von Kunowski deals with urban living spaces and people's individual characteristics, developing a visual language that combines documentary and fictional elements. His work has been shown in a range of venues, including the group exhibition and publication *Psychoscape: Periphery and Photography* (2002) and the exhibition *anlanden* in the Laden für Nichts Gallery in Leipzig (2005). Since 2015, he has been photographing public spaces in Berlin's Neukölln neighborhood. For the

publication *Wilhelm von Humboldt in Tegel. Ein Bildprogramm als Bildungsprogramm* (2018), von Kunowski produced interior views of the Humboldt Castle in Berlin Tegel. Since 2017, von Kunowski has been working with the team of Academy in Exile. Some of the resulting work, a series of portrait photographs of the Fellows, cannot be shown due to political sensitivities. For the exhibition and publication *What We Brought with Us*, von Kunowski photographed people's treasured possessions to show the objects in their true light. A selection of von Kunowski's work is published at jobstvonkunowski.de.



Claudia Tazreiter is Professor in Ethnic and Migration Studies at the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society (REMESO), Linköping University. Her research is in the fields of political sociology, social theory, visual cultures, race, ethnicity, and migration. The focus of this research is on the social and affective impacts of forced and irregular migration on human rights culture, the role of civil society in social change, and visual cultures of dissent. She is the author of numerous articles, chapters, and books, including *Asylum Seekers and the State: The Politics of Protection in a Security-Conscious World* (Routledge, 2017); *Fluid Security in the Asia*

Pacific: Transnational Lives, Human Rights and State Control (Palgrave, 2016); and the *Handbook on Migration and Global Justice*, edited with Leanne Weber (2021, Edward Elgar). Tazreiter has held several visiting appointments, including at the Institute for Political Science, University of Vienna (2018); Center for Place, Culture and Politics, City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center (2014); and the Center for International Studies (CERI), Sciences Po (2011); and is Fellow at the Institute for Migration and Intercultural Studies (IMIS), University Osnabrück.

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