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Introduction: The 'material turn' in migration studies

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Abstract

This introduction firstly discusses the ongoing paradigm shift in the study of transnational migration, in particular the emergent interest in the convergence of migration and material culture as the starting point of our investigation. It then highlights three aspects that this Special Issue could further in the current study of migration and materialities: namely, historical consciousness in materialising migration experiences and the notion of generational transmission; the everyday experience of body as the site for mutual constitution between subject and object; and the unique value of a language-based, interdisciplinary-oriented approach for migration studies. In the final part, it summarizes the four articles that follow, highlighting the contribution that each makes to our overall objective of making a 'material turn' in migration studies, and discusses some ways it could be further developed.

Keywords: materiality, mobility, transmission, embodiment, language and diaspora

A defining feature of the twenty-first century is transnational migration and its consequences. As a subject that is fundamentally important for understanding globality, new dynamics of social transformation and the formation of new identities and citizenship, it has become a key issue for public policy research and stands at the

centre of scholarly inquiries across a wide range of academic disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, geography, population studies, development studies, international relations, cultural studies, and so on. Earlier scholarship on transnationalism celebrates the unprecedented mobility and flexibility provided by thriving ‘transnational connections’ (Hannerz 1996) underpinned by transnational flows of capital, technology and communication networks, as argued by Arjun Appadurai (1999). It offers a triumphal portrayal of a ‘borderless world’ (Ohmae 1990) that witnesses the decline of nation-states and the rise of transnational subjects who live their lives simultaneously in more than one country and more than one culture (Basch et al. 1994). Attention is often focused on privileged cosmopolitan highfliers such as footloose ‘global careerists’ (Ho 2011) who move back and forth effortlessly in a ‘frictionless world’ in search of global economic and professional advantages. Similarly, in the study of cultural identities, preference is often given to the formation of ‘flexible citizenship’ (Ong 1999) linked to de-territorialised cultures and hybrid identities formed in the ‘space of flow’ (Castells 1996) in contrast to the rooted identities associated with the history and territorialised institutions of nation-states.

The recent development of academic literature has witnessed an emerging conceptual shift away from the previously highly abstract and generalised ideal of mobility to a more nuanced and grounded conceptualisation of movements. The space of this introduction does not allow for a comprehensive review of this new body of literature. However, a quick glance at the major developing arguments is sufficient to give a sense of the width and depth of this paradigm change. For instance, while recognising accelerated activities in communication, travel and economics as a result of ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey 1989) in the era of globalisation, scholars have

begun to pay more attention to the disparity, inequality and diversity of migration opportunities and experiences by looking at class-based, gendered and racialised power geometries operative across home and host societies and at both local and national levels (Kofman & Raghuram 2004, 2006; Raghuram 2000; Yeoh & Willis 2005b). Others are more attentive to the continuing significance of place, locality and border in making and remaking contemporary transnational mobilities (Vertovec 1999; Smith 2001; Nagel 2005; Yeoh and Willis 2005a) as well as the embeddedness of transnational flows in histories (Grewal 2005), without denying the unprecedented fluidity in the movement of people, ideas and information in contemporary world. It is now widely acknowledged among social scientists that ‘mundane’ everyday practices, once considered ‘trivial’ for theorisation, are actually inherent in transnational mobilities as sites where mobile individuals are simultaneously grounded and connected with transnational spheres (Bailey 2001; Conradson and Latham 2005; Conlon 2011). This current tide of evaluation of past studies of mobilities is well represented by what Schiller & Salazar (2013) call the building of ‘a regime of mobility across the globe’ in order to ‘challenge[s] conceptual orientations built on binaries of difference that have impeded analyses of the interrelationship between mobility and stasis’ (183).

At the centre of this new wave of appraisal, no matter how we may term it, is the attempt to break down long-existing artificial dichotomies in migration studies between ‘internal and international’ migration (cf. Cohen 1996; King and Skeldon 2010), ‘skilled and non-skilled’ migrants (cf. Robinson and Carey 2000; Kofman and Raghuram 2004; Wang 2012); ‘mobility and immobility’ (cf. Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006; Salazar and Smart 2011), ‘transnationalism and emplacement’ (cf. Smith 2001) and ‘migrant experiences and imaginaries’ (cf. Salazar 2011). It is safe to say

that the general trend of current research into mobilities is to move beyond the binary logic that characterised early scholarship, to explore more open-mindedly and more critically the intersectionalities of different forms of mobilities that shape and are shaped by the world we live in today.

In this Special Issue, we seek to contribute to this ongoing academic assessment by focusing on one crucial but so far under-researched aspect of international mobilities – the intersection and interaction between the movement of people and the movement of things. Indeed, among all the binaries in migration studies identified above, the divide between people and things is perhaps the biggest ‘blind spot’ that prevents us from seeing the full picture and complexity of migration trajectories and pursuit.

The dichotomy between subject and object is an epistemological assumption in Western thought, rooted in the distinction between the natural universe of things on the one hand and people who represent the natural universe on the other (Kopytoff 1986: 64; Latour 1993), and it is inherent in conventional studies of migration as in many other fields. It tends to prioritise people over things and often isolates migrants from the material environment in which they travel and the material consequences of their movements. The neglect of a material perspective in migration studies is also reflected in university curricula. A quick survey conducted by the author, of migration-related subjects currently offered at London-based universities suggests that the predominant focus of teaching, and the underpinning research, on migration in UK higher educational institutes centres on issues of international relations, national security, migration control, public policies, development studies, and legal studies, mostly discussed in British and European contexts only. Many fascinating topics and important issues in relation to the materiality of migration are missed out. It is not

until very recently that some scholars have started to pay attention to the material aspect of migration (Burrell 2008; Temple 2010; Abranches 2013; Savaş 2014), mostly as a by-product of their research into migrant experiences rather than an analytical framework in itself.

In this Special Issue we attempt to cover this ‘blind spot’, and thus to broaden our vision and diversify perspectives in the study of migration, diaspora and mobilities. The theoretical starting points of our academic journey are the canonical work by Appadurai (1986), *The Social Life of Things*, and Bourdieu’s 1977 *Theory of Practice*. On the one hand, we understand ‘objects’ as ‘things-in-motion’ and we ‘follow the things themselves’ in order to grasp the meanings that are ‘inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories’ (Appadurai 1986: 5); and on the other, we interpret human affections, desires and identities not in isolation from the material world but through things, by looking at ‘the dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality’ as argued by Bourdieu (1977: 72) in his conceptualisation of habitus. More directly, we are inspired by the notion of ‘migrant worlds’ proposed by Basu and Coleman (2008) in their ground-breaking work that discusses the possibility of merging migration and material culture:

We refer to ‘migrant worlds’ rather than ‘migration’ *per se*, in that we are not only concerned with the materiality of migration itself, but also with the material effects of having moved [...] and with the inter-relatedness of the movements of people and things. In addition, we want to convey the sense that a ‘world’ – an often fragmented and fragile set of material and non-material assumptions and resources – can itself be made mobile, seemingly

translated from one geographical location to another, even as it is transformed in the process. (Basu and Coleman, 2008: 313)

While Basu and Coleman (2008) broaden the sphere of material culture by incorporating migration studies into its traditional domain of investigation, we try to enrich the study of migration and diaspora by borrowing concepts and perspectives originating in material culture and other social theories. We argue for a ‘material turn’ in migration and mobility studies, shifting away from focusing on migrants alone, to see how people and things interact on different scales and in various contexts in the making of ‘migrant worlds’. Specifically, we look at how migration takes place through the medium of materiality, to understand materiality as migrants, and to examine ‘how persons make things and things make persons’ (Tilley et al. 2006: 2) in the process of ‘traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling’ (Clifford 1992: 108). Aware of the heterogeneous and ambiguous nature of the concept of materiality itself, we adopt a practical and inclusive definition of materiality, referring to various things in ‘migrant worlds’ such as food, clothes, architecture, public transportation, languages, family albums, letters, medicine, dancing, sound, smell, the Internet, built environment, and so on. In addition, we follow Basu and Coleman (2008) in using the plural of the term materiality to investigate how various materialities are ‘differently constituted through different forms of mobility’ (317) in and across diasporic spaces.

Bearing these general ideas in mind, in this Special Issue we seek to further the conceptualisation of ‘material worlds’ in three ways. Firstly, we emphasise a temporal dimension in materialising migration and diaspora. Our stand is inspired by but goes beyond the ‘biography approach’ (Appadurai 1986) that argues for following the trajectory of specific things moving through different hands, contexts and uses.

Instead, we share a broader historical consciousness in the treatment of interactions between migration and materiality. On the one hand, we ask how migration histories could be re-told and re-written from a material perspective by looking at the ways in which migrants negotiated 'sameness' and 'difference' through materiality and over time (Kelly, this issue); and how the material and non-material traces of migrant lives today can be archived and passed on to the next generation as a living heritage, and to what extent this future-oriented historical intervention can, reversely, shape the place-making and home-making of migrants in the present (Huc-Hepher, this issue).

Informed by the notion of 'generational transmission' proposed by Jacques Hassoun (1994), several articles in this Special Issue discuss in particular matters in relation to the politics and poetics of recollecting, performing and passing on inherited past and cultural heritage, at both the individual and the collective level, to the next generation and to broader 'migrant worlds'. Our research, for example, shows that creative remembering, reclaiming and transmitting the past provides an useful means by which Argentinian political exiles searched for a sense of belonging in cosmopolitan Paris (Miorelli, this issue), and to articulate an alternative 'diasporic trans-local subjectivity' as counter-memory to the official discourse of the Overseas Chinese in China (Wang, this issue). All together, they exemplify the value of historicalising materiality in conceptualising 'migrant worlds' in and across diasporic spaces.

The second idea we wish to explore is that of re-theorising migrants as embodied subjects, and the importance of everydayness in making and understanding 'migrant worlds'. It is not merely to have 'the focus moved from migration to the migrant, and from transnationalism to transnationals' (Dunn 2010: 2), as seen in the emergent 'embodied approach to transnationalism', which implies a continuous

prioritisation of people over things and gives little space for the discussion of the material environments and consequences of migration. Instead, to think the body here is ‘to engage embodiment or the body in all its sensuous and visceral specificities commingled, entangled and enmeshed, acting upon and being acted upon in material life worlds of differing character and composition’ (Spyer 2006: 125-131).

Drawing on the phenomenological approach as applied in material culture studies (Ingold 2000a, 2000b), we are interested in how people make place and construct identities through situated multidimensional sensuous and corporeal engagement (through sight, sound, touch, smell, taste) with the material world, and how things become the very medium through which migrants’ emotion and desires are objectified, articulated and extended. We focus specifically on the ‘mundane’ experience of the body in the production, consumption and transmission of things, and how ‘through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting, and living with things, people make themselves’ (Basu 2013: 382).

In-depth discussions of the mutual constitution between body and things are contextualised in specific diasporic experiences, ranging from being French and preparing, purveying and consuming French food in the making and remaking of the French community in the UK (Kelly, this issue), blogging about the diasporic lifestyle among the diasporic French in global London (Huc-Hepher, this issue), the interplay between collecting postage stamps and recollecting diasporic memory by returned Overseas Chinese in the PRC (Wang, this issue), and homecoming through tango dancing among Argentinian exiles (Miorelli, this issue). We argue collectively through these seemingly disparate case studies that migrants make sense of the world and of themselves as much through the ‘muscular consciousness’ (Ingold 1993: 167)

of the body as through the abstract thinking of the mind, and herein lies the significance of an embodiment perspective.

The final point is about methodological considerations behind this collective research project. All the contributors to this Special Issue are members of HOMELandS (Hub for Migration, Exiles, Languages and Spaces), a research group based at Department of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Westminster. While specialise in what is traditionally called Area Studies in the fields of French and Francophone studies, Hispanic studies and Chinese studies respectively, we share common interest in the study of migration and diaspora. Building on Westminster's long-term commitment to the teaching and research of modern languages and cultures, HOMELandS seek to contribute to the study of migration by promoting a language-based, theoretically informed and interdisciplinary-oriented approach, as applied in the research presented here. This method is valuable in two ways from our point of view. First, the ability to use the target language (here, French, Spanish and Chinese) to collect primary material in our respective areas gives us an edge in not only increasing the range and richness of the data collected, but also and perhaps more importantly, enhancing cross-cultural understanding (between English and non-English speaking worlds as well as between different linguistic diasporic spaces) of the research subject which is perhaps otherwise difficult to achieve. Second, while our researches into migrants have a strong historical orientation and are embedded in specific linguistic and cultural contexts, they are nevertheless open to and informed by theoretical debates in the larger fields of social and cultural theories. In addition to grant a historical underpinning to our investigations, we incorporate ideas from post-structuralism and semiotics on signs and texts (Huc-Hepher's and Wang's articles, this issue) and visual

culture (Miorelli's and Kelly's article, this issue) as integral parts of our research kits. The methodological diversity we hope to achieve, built on cross-fertilisation between the study of language, culture and social theories, enables us to shed some light on a critical understanding of new mobilities in the increasingly dynamic and intersected diasporic worlds.

The aim of this collection is to consider some relatively unexamined aspects of the study of transnational migration from a material perspective. It begins with an essay by Debra Kelly. Building upon her work on *A History of the French in London: Liberty, Equality, Opportunity* (Kelly and Cornick, 2013), Kelly brings together for the first time a number of fascinating culinary stories associated with the arrival, development, integration and changing nature of French food and gastronomy in London from the nineteenth century to the present day, framed within the notion of a migrant culture 'on display'. She asks questions about the extent to which food and culinary knowledge and practice could become a material marker of the cultural identities of French (and Francophone) migrants, and what roles the materiality of food played, and plays, in negotiating cultural and social inclusion/exclusion between French migrants and Londoners historically and in contemporary London. She argues that food – what, where, how it is produced, sold, bought, prepared and consumed, and by whom – is a key site for understanding the relationship between French migrant identity and material culture.

Kelly's historical account of food in association with French migrants is followed by Saskia Huc-Hepher's article, also concerned with the French in London, but with a focus on diasporic cyberspace, or in the author's words, 'diasberspace'. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Gunther Kress's multimodal social semiotic analytical model, Huc-Hepher combines a multimodal semiotic reading of a

London-French blog, captured and preserved in the UK Web Archive (UKWA), and an ethnographic analysis of the stories of bloggers. By looking at the dynamic relationship between everyday on-line activities and corporeal presence in the physical environment, she argues that the materiality of ‘diasberspace’ sheds new light on the hybrid habitus that members of London’s French community inhabit and that inhabits them, and enables us to think more creatively about the role of academics in documenting, studying and making histories of migrants in the present and for the future.

The next two articles move the geographical focus away from the European context to the Hispanic and Chinese diasporic worlds respectively. With a similar interest in the artistic representation of exiled subjects, Romina Miorelli discusses the complexity and multiple facets of the Southern Cone exile experience in general, and the Argentineans in particular, based on an analysis of the 1985 film *Tangos: el exilio de Gardel*. Her discussion of identity articulation is organised around three levels of materiality identified in the film: the film itself as an object; the cultural production, with the tango as a key element and consistent theme, which the film characters try to stage; and the materiality of the everyday life of the exiles as portrayed by the film. She argues that the film, as a multi-layered material form, both embodied and reshaped perceptions and practices of the memory of dictatorships in Southern Cone countries in the 1970s. It brings back the voices of exiles into the mainstream reconstruction of memories of the traumatic past, opening up new debate on the relationship between politics, body, material culture and diasporic memory in transnational space.

In the final article of this collection, Cangbai Wang takes one of the ‘small things’ in migrant ‘life worlds’, postage stamps, as his focus of analysis. A semiotic

interpretation of a postage stamp exhibition put up jointly by an ordinary *guiqiao* (Returned Overseas Chinese) and an official museum in China unveils the tension and compromise between two co-existing meaning systems. On the surface and mainly through words, it promulgates a clichéd China-centred discourse of diasporic Chinese as patriotic subjects, legitimated by the authority of an official museum. Simultaneously, it articulates implicitly a ‘trans-local diasporic subjectivity’ conveyed by the imagery of postage stamps and underpinned by constant interactions between the materiality of stamps and the bodily experience of stamp collectors beyond the museum. This article contributes to the study of *guiqiao* and Chinese diaspora in general in two ways. Firstly, it complicates understandings of the politics of *guiqiao* identity construction and articulation. Rather than seeing the agency of *guiqiao* as passive acceptance and use of official rhetoric for the sake of political safety, it conceptualise the agency as a two-way negotiation between the state from above and *guiqiao* from below, involving, simultaneously, conformity with and resistance to imposed official discourse of political, social and cultural differences. Secondly, it sheds new light on the poetics of identity making among *guiqiao*. It shows that rather than making outright political claims for autonomous identities, *guiqiao* have tended to resort to implicit and sometimes artistic ways to express their emotion, desire and belongings, often through bodily engagement with art objects and innovative museum practices.

Collectively, through a number of language-based empirical case studies of migrants and exiles in different cultural and geographical locations and different times, we wish to stimulate a more nuanced and contextualised research on materialities in the increasingly complex and dynamic globalised world. One way to extend research on migration and materiality is to examine the movement of people

and things in and across diasporic spaces through a comparative and transcultural perspective. Such a focus would encourage intellectual dialogues between often segregated studies of migrants in different cultural contexts, and enable us to identify and study major common themes faced by different migrant groups comparatively. It will be interesting, for example, to compare the role of food, language and festival in identity construction and cultural transmission in different diasporic worlds, and to look at the sameness and difference in the ways in which traumatic events (such as famine or war) in the past are remembered/forgotten, imagined and exploited by diasporic populations (such as the Irish, Chinese and Arabic diasporas) in the making of identities and communities in the present, and in shaping their visions of the future.

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