

## **64. Contest knowledge: Re-theorizing migration through the lens of material culture? (Roundtable)**

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*AG Migration*

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In recent years, migration scholars have contested many dichotomies created by policy makers when categorizing people on the move (e.g. legal vs. illegal, voluntary vs. forced, smuggling vs. trafficking). In this regard, the concept of 'mixed migration' by Van Hear is probably the most known and it has been even adapted by the UNHCR for a short period in their reports. Contributors have warned from (uncritically) using and reproducing legal categories. They are instead in favour of using our own analytical categories that reflect the lived experiences of migrants. This criticism has enlarged the schism between migration scholars and the public debate, and increased contestations on the usefulness of knowledge we are producing.

Recently, Sandra H. Dudley and Yi-Neumann et al, have adopted a material culture lens to demonstrate that one's relationship to things, so often taken for granted, is challenged by the conditions of flight and migration. Either due to the need for adapting to new ways of living and/or when an entitlement to things is contested. Also, questions of entitlement to things reveal indeed many aspects ranging from emotions, identity and belonging to aspects of inequalities and racism. For instance, possessing a strong passport can turn over crossing borders from a humiliating experience to a pleasant one and manifestation of superiority.

Building on these works, this panel aims to stimulate a scholarly dialogue that seeks to retheorize migration in the light of these complex dynamics that inform people's relationships to material objects. We want to discuss: In what ways does the material culture turn contribute to debates on contestations of knowledge in the field of migration? Does material culture turn help in re-theorizing migration?

## **Subversive Things. The materiality of the “in-between” and migrants' agency.**

***Hans Peter Hahn, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main***

Classical approaches to material culture understand objects as representing a certain culture, social group or stratum within a society. This approach of a link between things and negotiated, recognised and often historically traceable identities is not sufficient to understand the materiality of migrant life-worlds. Migrants' things, whether they are their material possessions or only temporarily used objects, reveal something quite different. As the studies by Jason de Leon, Dan Hicks and Sarah Mallet have explored, these things form heterogeneous assemblages. They cannot be explained by the pragmatics of everyday demands, nor by reference to the identity of the migrants' origins. Things that are picked up on the way or gathered at interim stop-overs in the expectation of creating a lifeworld in the future. Furthermore, these items are the expression of the ruptures and contradictions that migrants are confronted with during their migration process. It therefore is necessary to link the tense relationship between the past present and future of the migrants with the specific materiality. In order to exemplify this, research from a past BMBF project (<https://mobile-welten.org/>) as well as the results of a current master's study on the refugee camp Vathy on Samos will be used.

## **Past materiality and current databases**

***Timm Sureau, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle Wittenberg***

“So, how do you check the validity of a claim of origin in the absence of documents?”, I ask the asylum court judge. “I use online maps,” he replies, “to ask the plaintive about geographic highlights in his area: the name of a mosque or a street. And I check MILO [, Migrations-InfoLogistik, a country of origin information (COI) software] for events reported in local newspapers and ask him about it.”

Assembled and accessed through MILO and maps, internationalised digital representations of past, now distant and inaccessible materiality of asylum seekers' former physical livelihoods – playgrounds, streets, and newspapers – are used in the determination of the right to residence and asylum decisions in cases of migration to Germany.

BAMF manages access to country data and commissions a software company to develop new features and for updates for MILO. The determination of developed features, such as a timely implementation of a modern fuzzy search, lies in the companies' hands. Caught in logics of order fulfilment, its programmers are

somehow co-responsible while fundamentally detached from the processed data, the decision-making processes they co-shape. In this presentation, I analyse the methods of production of the digital materiality behind managing relatedness and temporalities of those artefacts.

### **The Fabric of Home: Contesting the dichotomy of home and away through clothing**

***Charlot Schneider, Universität Hamburg***

My research investigates the ways in which material culture bridges the dichotomies of here and there, past and future, and home and away in the field of migration. Through exploring the objects that migrants bring with them and acquire on their routes of migration, I explore aspects of identity, belonging and community. Through objects, participants keep strong connections to past loved ones, places and senses of self. However, objects are also key to building a sense of self throughout the journey and projecting them into the future. Through the in-depth analysis of two migrants' stories, I highlight that home is not a onetime accomplishment but a lived experience that people are continuously involved in, especially in times of upheaval and transformation as they search for a safer place to be in the world. Clothes, as one of the few materials that many migrants carry, become central to this lived experience not only as semiotic devices, carrying different narratives of home, but also as sensual materials through which different sensations of home are carried, transformed, and negotiated.

### **Lost in Transition: Studying the Statelessness, Loss and Survival of Rohingyas in India**

***Tirthankar Chakraborty, Freie Universität Berlin***

The Rohingya conundrum has generated a vast number of discourses on ethnic violence and cleansing, migration, security threats, migrants' helplessness, state policies, international response. Deemed as the largest ethnic violence in the twenty-first century, the Rohingyas' material plight continues to be abysmal, no matter where they are. As India positions itself as a major player in global politics, the response towards the Rohingyas has raised many questions. Following the response, the need to understand the reasons for this response is important to understand the rationale behind the actions of the largest democracy of the world. In the absence of adequate state response, the material support by international organizations like the UNHCR and the role of civil society groups have enabled the

'lost' immigrants to have a shred of dignity. With the help of ethnographic data and policy documents by the Indian state, the plight of the Rohingyas in Hyderabad, India will be looked at closely to understand not only the abject material conditions engulfing a refugee population but also how the loss of materiality in the homelands of the war-torn immigrants.

### **On the move: From refugee housing to private apartments. A struggle for agency**

***Samantha Strohmenger, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen***

The questions relevant for this workshop are approached by taking a closer look at the life of immigrants residing in governmental refugee camps and are based on current observations in the field. In particular, the focus lies on the allocation of housing for refugees by the authorities. Life in asylum shelters is usually biopolitically controlled. Privacy is almost non-existing, and it is barely possible to own property. Moreover, racism must be considered as part of the biopolitical management by the authorities. The distribution of private housing is often perceived as racist by African communities, who observe a preference for "white colors". Accordingly, the highly desired private apartments, as a source of hope for a better life and the desire for social advancement, are also interwoven with racist and discriminatory structures. Refugee housing must therefore be seen as a significant contested material good. It promises a separation from a socially constructed homogenized mass of immigrants and a chance for social participation. Considering it as a material cultural fact, which influences immigration experiences, can lead to a new understanding in social policymaking on the long term.

### **Transnational migration and social media: a material culture shaping transnational experience**

***Saleh Seid Adem, Universität zu Köln***

*In this day and age, my smartphone is my lifeline. I would sometimes rather lose my passport than my phone, which has all my contacts, passwords, and everything else on it.*

Aminate, a yo-yo Ethiopian labour migrant from Dubai, compares her three transnational experiences to show the emergence of a new material culture. Aminate and others assert that their access to and use of social media via smartphones was extraordinarily potent from the conception of their transnational

imaginaries, processing transnational recruitment, constructing transnational networks, adjusting to the new transnational working and living environments, and ensuring a safe return and reintegration. Ethiopian migrants in the UAE showed that social media is a double-edged sword that creates equality but also new inequalities, safety but also insecurity, new coping capacities but also new vulnerabilities, and new agency but also new exploitation in the transnational space. This study will use ethnographic and netnographic methods to examine how a transnational migrant's material entitlement to a smartphone with internet access and a social media account (Facebook, WhatsApp, or Telegram) may be beneficial and detrimental. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread digitalization of informal and institutional practices strengthened the role of social media in migrants' transnational experiences. This appeal is made within the patronage-based kafala or sponsorship system that regulates migrant immigration, employment, and residence in the Gulf States.