

# **International Migration and Senses of Belonging: On the Nexus of Mobility and Place Attachment**

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## **Starting point**

The starting point of the research that I present today is the observation that the neoliberal demand of frequent mobility has led to a growing number of people who live their lives against the background of recurring mobility. This holds true for both high-skilled (Beverstock 2005) and low-skilled workers (e.g. Pai 2004; Yeoh und Soco 2014). But contrary to assumptions that this frequent mobility leads to decreasing importance of places in favor of spaces (e.g. Hannerz 1990), current empirical studies show that places still matter for migrants (e.g. Ahmed u. a. 2003a; Walsh 2006). Often, social networks or local communities are identified as important for this “situatedness during mobility” (Brickell und Datta 2011, 3) and place attachment (e.g. Cieraad 2010). But next to fellow people, another aspect of people’s environments is only rarely considered: objects (Nowicka 2007; Bardhi, Eckhardt, und Arnould 2012).

Coming from the fields of urban studies and science and technology studies, my assumption is that the things around us, the material furnishings and equipment of our environment, the “stuff” as Daniel Miller (2010) calls it, co-constitute the social world. This is not to say that people are not important. Rather, it is to say that material culture plays a role as well.

Today, I want to focus on two forms of nexus: on the nexus of mobility and place attachment and, intimately connected to that, on the nexus of human and non-human actors, of objects and people.

My case is that of international transmigration of highly-skilled people. I research people who have moved at least three times in their professional lives and have stayed at their temporary place of residence for at least 1 year without interruption. Moving implies in this case also the crossing of national borders.

My hypothesis is that repeated mobility, in this case migration across territorial borders, leads to a specific form of place attachment. For this form of attachment, in turn, the interplay of human and non-human actors is key.

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## **The observation**

The important role of non-human actors for place attachment struck me already in the first interview with a teacher. She told me: “my violoncello was always with me”. It wouldn’t have struck me in such a way if she had said “a print of my grandmother”. But to take a violoncello with you when you move from Japan to Mexico is not the easiest thing to do, not to mention the financial costs. The more interviews I did, the more the data showed that everyday objects are crucial for migrants to create senses of belonging.

Thus, today’s paper focusses on the nexus of human and non-actors and tried to use the findings resulting from that to shed light on the nexus of mobility and place attachment in general.

## **The analysis, part 1: The nexus of human and non-human actors**

Everyday objects – like a violoncello or a bicycle – play a significant role for migrants to create senses of belonging at the places between which they migrate. These objects are constitutive for the migrants’ attachment to a place and for their “situatedness during mobility”. The migration biographies of my interviewees revealed that there are at least two categories of objects that are important: mobile and immobile objects. Mobile objects like the aforementioned violoncello are taken with the migrants on their travels. Immobile objects remain in place and are left behind when the migrants move again. For one of my interviewees, this was a motor scooter, a Vespa. It allowed him to explore the place where he lived and significantly helped to establish a sense of belonging to his place of residence, his temporary “hometown”.

My data show that the objects in question can be analytically distinguished between those that travel with the migrant, such as clothes or analog pictures, and those that remain in place when the migrant leaves, such as motorcycle or furniture. Additionally, I identified a third category: certain objects serve as mediators for social interaction. These mediating objects such as laptops make it possible for the migrant to use communication technologies to stay in touch with geographically distant people he or she feels emotionally attached to.

### *Travelling objects*

Mobile or travelling objects are those that migrants take with them. Those to which they feel so emotionally attached to that they do all they can to take them with them. Often, they are also small or light enough to be taken along, such as analog photographs. But sometimes, rather heavy and/or bulky objects are taken along such as a violoncello.

The interviewee takes the violoncello with her every time she moves to a new place: from Japan to Mexico, from Mexico back to Japan, from Japan to Germany. At the temporary places of residence, she takes classes in playing the instrument, but also plays in private groups and in an orchestra. In general, the instrument is a way to get to know people – people who share the love for music with her. In addition, to her, playing the instrument is a way to feel emotionally at home.

In this case, the meaning of the instrument remains rather stable over time and over the geographical distances she travels. But objects can also change in meaning over time. An interviewee describes the practical and emotional value of clothes in the context of her own mobility:

“in the course of such relocations, you always change [...] personally, in your look [...] and when I came back with some things which I really liked there [in the US] [...] well, then I thought, ‘you can’t wear that here the same way’ ((laughing)) [...] and little by little, well, I kept some of the things, but I know I won’t wear them again, it’s just the reminiscence [of the past]” (ITM\_11, author’s translation)

“[the clothes that I wore in the US] moved with me, again and again, they are in the basement ((laughing)), they still exist [...] I also look at them from time to time, think ‘yeah, it was great’ [...] I don’t want to throw them away [...] it’s also a bit of nostalgia behind [this decision]” (ITM\_11, author’s translation)

Traveling objects differ internally in regard to their usage: some are continuously used, such as the violoncello. In the course of migration, their meaning remains rather stable. Other objects are used in one place, such as clothes. When taken to other places, they serve as means to conserve memories and as material trace of the, often glorified, past.

#### *Stationary objects*

In contrast to travelling objects, immobile or stationary objects remain in place even when the migrant moves again. One example is a scooter. A scientist from Venezuela, talks about his time in Spain:

“I got a Vespa, a motorcycle [...] so I could reach places that you could not reach with public transportation, I was looking for these places, these covered, amazing places [...] [like] a restaurant with typical amazing food” (ITM\_10).

This scooter is an object that enables him to partake in the local everyday life. In addition, it allows him to gain specific knowledge that turns him into a local expert, differentiating him

from foreigners and tourists. Being a local expert then helps to stabilize his identity in spite of continuous mobility demands – it is a possibility to “reground” (Ahmed u. a. 2003b) again. In addition, using the scooter to drive around also helps to constitute certain spaces and to establish a place attachment. I will later come back to this.

To sum up: Traveling and stationary objects differ in the role they play in the migration biography. Traveling objects continue to play a role when the migrant moves to a new location, even if an object is not actively used any more but are stored in the basement. They serve as material traces of the past, can be looked at and touched. Stationary objects cease to play a role as soon as the migrant leaves the place. Only the memory remains, but the objects cannot be looked at (solely pictures of them can be looked at), used, touched.

### *Mediating objects*

The third category of objects is somewhat different. Here, the objects do not only play a role as material things, but also as a means to an end. One example:

“Something that I always took with me was my laptop. It sounds really not fun ((laughing))  
[...] [it makes communication a lot] cheaper, easier” (ITM\_10).

The laptop is a classic example for a mediating object: it is an object that travels with the migrants and plays a role *as objects* both when moving and when being stationary. In addition, it allows for communicating with others. Here, I do not mean communication via e-mail, but communication via Voice over IP-technologies such as Skype (#is Video terminologically integrated in VoIP?#). Pragmatic reasons play a role here:

“[it makes communication a lot] cheaper, easier” (ITM\_10).

Here, the laptop is the object that allows the interviewee to stay in touch with people who he met at other stations during his mobile biography. This is what Greschke (2012, 106ff.) discusses for the case of the web portal “Cibervalle”, used by Paraguayan migrants to stay in touch with each other and people at home in Paraguay.

A technology used with the help such an object is Facebook. An interviewee puts it like this:

“so many people rail at Facebook, I am happy havin’ it, because if I didn’t have it, I couldn’t keep in touch so easily with so many people who now live just anywhere in the world”  
(ITM\_11, author’s translation).

Here, a technology is used with the help of a mediating object such as the computer or the mobile phone to span a translocal space. People communicating with each other via the

technology create the internet as social space (Greschke 2012, 106) across geographically distant places for the time they communicate.

Interestingly, here again is a temporal dimension visible: the interviewee quoted above stays in touch with people whom she met at other stations of her biography. Similar to the clothes that are a material trace of the past, we encounter social traces of the past, ultimately helping to stabilize the migrants' identities during their migration processes. And again, it is an indication for the observation that "*being mobile is not necessarily about being detached*", as Ahmed et al. (Ahmed u. a. 2003a, 1, original emphasis) emphasize.

#### *Final words on the nexus of human and non-human actors*

The examples show a strong nexus of human and non-human actors during migration. Non-human actors can be assigned to different groups of objects. They serve different purposes, but generally help to stabilize identities during mobility and to allow for forms of place attachment. This second nexus, the nexus of mobility and place attachment, is what I turn to now.

### **The analysis, part 2: The nexus of mobility and place attachment**

Attachment to places or regrounding takes place against the background of leaving-again-soon, against the background of continuously being reminded of one's mobility or uprooting.

#### *Mobility*

Being continuously reminded of the necessity to move again, sooner or later, has affects on the attachment to places. An interviewee describes this effect with the notion of "deadlines" and relates his places of residence to his professional career:

"the times you live in cities [...] have deadlines, at least in your mind. That allows you to cope with situations. 'I could do this for two years', [...] 'I am doing this for my career', [...] to make a step and then I'm gonna move." (ITM\_10)

"Coping with situation" is an expression to describe the specific spatial dimension of migration, that is a missing identification with places. But it also addresses a social dimension of migration when he continues:

"the friendships are less tight [...] you are able to start this connection, but then you've lost it very fast because the dynamic [in a metropolis] is completely different" (ITM\_10).

He explains the specific character of relationships between people, "friendships" as he calls it, with the fact that the relationships are established against the background of continuously

having in mind that oneself or the other person might move to some other place sooner or later. The relationships with people at the temporary place of residence are fragile and show a characteristic dynamic. This is also the reason why international or expat communities are often very much appreciated:

“the expat community is so important because they understand our way of thinking” (ITM\_6)

Regrounding is made possible with the help of the international community. Here, it is not so much the individual persons whom the migrant meets. Rather, the fact that the members of the international community all know about feelings of detachment, of processes of uprooting and mobility in general, makes them key persons for the transmigrants. They all share the experience of being mobile and an identity as transmigrant – and these shared experiences in turn help to stabilize their individual identities. Ultimately, the international community allows for certain place attachments, for senses of belonging to the temporary places of residence.

#### *Place attachment*

Connecting to the local international community is one way to establish forms of place attachment. The other is to look for places where spaces of home can be constituted. In the case of the scientist from Venezuela, this turns out to be a particular bar in a Spanish city, his temporary place of residence:

“I had a really small flat [...] I always said I have a living room, and my living room were the bars, so **I just go to the bar, to my living room** and then I bring my papers, I get a coffee and then I read [...] I don't talk, that's part of my work [...] and it turned out that, I found this place, [name of the bar], [...] and **this place becomes really magic**, it was a place where **I met so much amazing guys** to the point that when I finished my thesis, in the acknowledgements, there are the names of this bar [...] if you go to this bar, there are books, and you see my thesis” (ITM\_10, author's emphasis).

Going to the bar, working there and meeting “amazing guys” there turns this bar into his “living room”. The notion of the living room reminds of the notion of home, of an emotional attachment and the sense of belonging to a place. And this is what this bar is able to provide the migrant with: place attachment.

This is of particular importance as the lifestyle as transmigrant is hard, according to this same interviewee:

“one of the hardest things about this mobility is that you loose your ground [...] you need a

reference [...] if I have to move I want to go touch my roots and re-connect” (ITM\_10).

Over the years, he developed the practice of returning to his country of origin before moving to a new place – to “touch my roots and reconnect”. This is a very interesting form of regrounding, I would say – and he is the only one in my sample who describes the role of his country of origin this way.

For international transmigrants, place attachment can take various forms, but we always see that mobility and place attachment are closely connected. The nexus of mobility and place attachment is characteristic for international transmigration and their lives at and between geographically distant places.

### **Conclusion**

What my cases show is that the nexus of human and non-human actors, of people and objects, plays a key role in migration processes, not least for establishing senses of place attachment against the background of a continuous demand to be mobile in the professional life. On an abstract level, the nexus of objects and people corresponds to a nexus of mobility and place attachment which is characteristic for the lives of international migrants. With the help of certain objects, migrants establish an attachment to a place. The objects significantly account for the migrants’ “situatedness during mobility” and for their ability to reground. Additionally, migrants build networks, composed of people and objects, helping them to create a feeling of belonging at certain places.

Some final words concerning people. People, who are not explicitly named in the title of my presentation, can also be mobile as well as static. Expat communities, which constitute a major resource for the transmigrants, structurally remain in the same place although the single persons involved might migrate themselves.<sup>1</sup> Other people accompany the migrants on the travels, for example the family. Thus, people play a significant role for highly mobile people – and so do objects. Today, it was my concern to show that it is worth looking at the nexus of human and non-human actors if we want to understand the relation between location and mobility and if we want to advance our insights in the field of migration studies.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup>Kann man dann von einer globalen expat-community sprechen, in die man sich einfach an unterschiedlichen Orten neu einloggt?

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