Networks of home, travel and use during Hong Kong return migration: thinking topologically about the spaces of human-material practices

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**Abstract**

Despite acknowledgements that migration depends on human-material practices, research into migrant materialities has often focused on limited spatio-temporal frames and the relation of objects to (inter)personal concerns. Taking everyday interactions with materials as of inherent interest, this paper examines how thinking topologically about multiple spaces helps to trace migrants’ relationships to changing groups of objects. After introducing Mol and Law’s (1994) concepts of regional, network, and fluid space, the paper discusses three types of networks with diverse relations to them: networks of home, for travel, and of use. Though networks of home are important to migrants, and can remain intact while travelling across regions, they also demonstrate considerable fluidity in interaction with other networks, which themselves affect adaptation and everyday practices. Supported by examples from Hong Kong return migrants, the paper shows how managing multiple material networks, each with multiple spatial relations, is central to being migrant.

**Keywords**

space; materiality; return migration; home; everyday practices; human-material networks

**Introduction**

As migrants move across borders, their relationships to people, nations, and routines of everyday life change and evolve. Though the material aspects of these social interactions have received limited attention, they are of considerable importance. Passports facilitate mobility while also materializing political instability and national inequalities (Burrell 2008). Cell phones, and letters or cassettes before them, structure the temporality of loving or conflict-ridden communications with family overseas (Madianou and Miller 2012). Even accidentally-carried lemons can threaten border security and prevent people’s mobility (Rossiter 2011). Materialities are integral to both personal and social aspects of migration and as Basu and Coleman note “we might just as easily say migration through materiality, since the one is impossible without the multi-dimensional yet vital presence of the other” (2008: 328). Attending to “migrant worlds” therefore involves a concern for not only “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” (Basu and Coleman 2008: 313). Migration is about not only migrants’ relationships with (non-)migrant people, but also their relationships with migrant objects.

The burgeoning literature on migrant materialities, however, has devoted limited attention to several important questions. How can multiple and complex spatial relationships be attended to in considerations of migrant materialities? How does migration transform relationships involving not singular objects but sets and groups of them? How do interactions with these multiple materialities affect the everyday practices of migrants’ lives? This paper explores these questions, arguing that they mark a new approach to specifying the dynamics of migrant-material interactions and how being migrant depends on engaging with materialities.

In doing so, it builds upon several important departures in previous research. Firstly, it considers but does not privilege spaces of the home. Studies have considered the materialities of the home in order to flesh out complex dynamics of emotions and memories, as well as ongoing practices that recall previous homes (Miller 2008; Walsh 2006; Law 2001; Tolia-Kelly 2004). The importance of materialities to migrants, however, extends beyond their (new) homes to public spaces and paths of travel (e.g. Burrell 2011). Extending the spatio-temporal focus beyond homes therefore incorporates a wider range of human-material interactions, including those unrelated to place attachment. Secondly, it builds upon discussions of transnationalism and critiques of “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) by considering how understandings of spatiality frame research on migration. The privileging of national concerns and frameworks within much migration research is often tied to understandings of space as an objective property that endures irrespective of human intervention. National boundaries created within this type of space become a precondition for the very category of migrants, who are defined and constituted by their mobility across borders. Yet important dynamics of migration cannot be captured within the framework of objective space – the proximity of close-knit (but potentially geographically-dispersed) social networks has for instance been highlighted in studies of transnational communication or consumption (Madianou and Miller 2012; Collins 2009) and processes of family or chain migration (Fong *et al.* 1995; Salaff *et al.* 2010). By engaging with discussions of social topologies (Mol and Law 1994) and networks, this paper further explores the multiple spaces of human-material relationships over the course of migration. Thirdly, rather than using materialities to characterize dynamics of human relationships, this paper takes human-material relationships to be of inherent interest. It draws upon social theories that deem materials to be both capable of shifting the course of social life and integral to the ongoing reproduction of the social through situated performances (Schatzki 2002; Schatzki 2010; Law 1994; Latour 2005; Shove *et al.* 2012; Reckwitz 2002). The process of migration, as a result, is seen to unfold through a diverse collection of practices that depend upon human and material interaction.

The following section elaborates upon this understanding of networks, spaces, and nonhuman actors, and introduces the three types of human-material networks that are examined in the remainder of the paper: networks of home, for travel and of use. By considering how these networks relate to multiple types of spaces and how objects are implicated in multiple networks, the paper shows how engaging with multiple spatial topologies enriches understandings of the human-material relationships that characterize migrant life.

**Social topologies and migration**

At first glance, migration processes can seem marked by a clear set of spatial distinctions: migrants cross regional or national borders and in the process are subject to regulations and must adapt to new cultures. Yet relying too heavily upon this framing of migration can take spatial distinctions to be objective, natural facts, rather than negotiated and constructed accomplishments. National boundaries and cultures change, and important aspects of social life fit uneasily within objective depictions of space. Considering multiple spatial relationships is therefore necessary for understanding how the social systems and boundaries relevant to migrants’ lives can take multiple forms.

In order to expand the possibilities for discussing space, Mol and Law suggest the value of thinking in terms of topology (1994). Thinking topologically involves acknowledging that “‘The social’ doesn’t exist as a single spatial type. Rather, it performs several *kinds of space* in which different ‘operations’ take place” (Mol and Law 1994: 643). Looking at different types of space offers varying understandings of how relations of proximity are determined and to what extent boundaries and systems are fixed. Mol and Law highlight three kinds of space:

First, there are *regions* in which objects are clustered together and boundaries are drawn around each cluster. Second, there are *networks* in which distance is a function of the relations between the elements and difference a matter of relational variety . . . [Third,] sometimes boundaries come and go, allow leakage or disappear altogether, while relations transform themselves without fracture. Sometimes, then, social space behaves like a *fluid*. (Mol and Law 1994: 643)

Though regional spaces are most frequently discussed in public discourses, thinking topologically involves accounting for how social interactions play out through multiple types of spatial relationships.

In some ways, the literature on human migration has already demonstrated a topological sensitivity. Though migrants as a group are defined by their relationship to regional space, national boundaries and the citizenship that depends on these, studying how migrants are physically or symbolically aligned with one region or another (Skeldon 1994b; Castles 2007; Li 2005; Ley 2003) represents only one tradition within migration research. The literature on transnationalism has highlighted network topologies and the interpersonal relationships that can be held constant regardless of one’s regional location (Bailey *et al.* 2002; Collins 2008; Conradson and Latham 2005). In addition, aspects of fluidity can be found in discussions of return migrants, whose identities and affiliations repeatedly transform (Sussman 2011; Levitt 2009; Long and Oxfeld 2004). Yet these explorations of multiple kinds of space have retained a largely humanist focus – tracing how fluidities, networks, and regions relate to groups of human actors. More work must therefore be done to consider how multiple kinds of space are implicated in human-material relationships.

Law and Mol show how topological thinking multiplies perspectives on human-material relationships through the example of a ship:

In Cartesian, regional or Euclidean space place is defined by a set of relative three-dimensional co-ordinates. So long as a ship is tied up in the harbour in Lisbon it does not move. And as soon as it sets out to sea, it displaces itself. But the space implied in actor-network theory is different. Is there no change in the working relations between the hull, the spars, the sails, the sailors and all the rest? If this is the case then the ship is immutable in the sense intended by Latour. It does not move in relation to a network space. (Law and Mol 2003: 4; Latour 1987)

While Law and Mol don’t describe how a ship might be seen as fluid, the Canadian ship *Bluenose II* provides an apt case. The *Bluenose II*, the province of Nova Scotia’s “sailing ambassador” has recently been restored in order to address wear and make it more similar to its namesake the *Bluenose* (Province of Nova Scotia 2013). Despite significant material changes, this transformation hasn’t made it a new ship, in that the provincial government and local management team find no need to call it the *Bluenose III*. This ability to transform gradually, without becoming entirely different, marks the *Bluenose II* as having fluid spatial relations.

Considering human-material relationships in this light need not presume, as Mol and Law would, the complete symmetry of humans and objects (e.g. Law 1994). As Schatzki notes, acknowledging both human and nonhuman actors is important, but taking for granted that they act in exactly the same way would deny how intentionality uniquely characterizes human action (2002: 198-200). Moreover, while Schatzki would not disagree that “the social is a set of processes, of transformations” (Law 1994: 15), actor-network theory, by insisting that the ordering of these processes can never be taken for granted, prevents a consideration of how material contexts or social practices exist as recognizable and interrelated dimensions of social life (Schatzki 2010: 135). This paper draws upon Mol and Law in order to emphasize that more attention needs to be given to nonhuman actors and how human-material interactions constitute and transform migration. Yet building upon Schatzki, it also focuses upon human migrants as actors of particular interest, who perform the practices that structure migration – everything from shopping and cooking meals for friends to applying for visas and going through immigration checkpoints.

The remainder of the paper focuses upon how human-material networks change over the course of migration, in relation to regional, network, and fluid space. As Schatzki acknowledges, “What a given actor can do depends on the particular network that it itself is (a human, for instance, is a network of organs, bones, nerve fibers) and on its location in wider networks” (2010: 134). Likewise, migrants’ everyday lives depend upon material networks. Taking material, rather than interpersonal, networks as a focus provides an opportunity to consider how objects are not only meaningful to migrants, but also constrain practices and necessitate complex negotiations. The paper focuses in particular on interactions between multiple networks that form and dissolve over time. It is the interaction between 1) networks that keep their relations over regional space, what Latour has discussed in terms of “immutable mobiles” (1987), and 2) the fluidity with which everyday objects can become part of different human-material arrangements that is considered in greater detail. More broadly speaking, the paper contributes to considerations of how multiple networks of people and things relate to stability and change in migrants’ lives.

These dynamics are discussed through a focus on three types of human-material networks – those enacting home, created for travel and facilitating use. They are different from each other in network space, and the discussion extends Mol and Law’s work by also showing how they have particular relationships with regional and fluid space. Each network is seen to emerge through practice, with the relevant links existing by virtue of being created and maintained rather than disarticulated or destroyed. Some connections are more difficult than others to create or break – contrast for instance how freestanding and built-in fridges connect to structures in a kitchen – and this affects potentials for fluid spatial relations and movement across regional space. Being performed, these networks can also change. Their components may overlap, or relations may become difficult to maintain in different regional spaces. Looking at networks of home, for travel and of use therefore highlights human-material interactions at different points in the migration process and touches upon the varied sets, occasions of disuse, and public spaces that have been overlooked in previous work.

The discussion draws upon a qualitative study of return migrants in Hong Kong, a city with a complex history of migration. Over many generations, more and less privileged migrants have transformed what was a population of less than ten thousand people when the British occupied the island in 1841 (Skeldon 1994a: 21) to a metropolis of over 7 million. Return migrants, residents who lived outside Hong Kong for at least three months, are now numerous, making up an estimated 11.8% of the population (Bailey and Law 2013). Despite this rich history, and a similarly rich body of research, the role of materialities in Hong Kong migration has been routinely ignored. This study therefore developed a three-stage process investigating the movement of migrants’ everyday objects, which included two semi-structured interviews and an intervening period in which all eleven participants1 completed an ‘object experiment book’. This book invited them to document the mobilities of one object using a range of exercises including photo diaries, social mapping and storytelling. These glimpses of objects’ travel fed into the second interview, and provided an opportunity to discuss the human-material interactions within participants’ migration histories in more detail.

The next section draws upon existing literature to discuss networks of home. Subsequent sections then take up examples from Hong Kong return migrants to consider networks for travel and of use. Each pushes forward considerations of migrant materialities by showing how mobilities across regional space relate to changing human-material relations in network and fluid space.

**Intermittently fluid networks of home**

One place that migrant materialities have been investigated is within people’s homes. Though colloquially homes are often singular and static within regional space, their multiplicity and mobility have also been recognized. For nomadic cultures, including Australian aboriginals, home can be inseparable from movement through regional space: “to feel ‘at home’ in that country depended on being able to leave it” (Chatwin 1987: 63). For others, having one static home does not preclude having others – whether second homes, previous homes, or touristic sites that home practices overflow into (Hui 2008; McIntyre *et al.* 2006; Hall and Müller 2004). Assessments or assumptions that migrants have always left home can therefore be valuably reconsidered.

The new homes that migrants build abroad, for instance, can materially and symbolically gesture to previous homes in different regional spaces. Tolia-Kelly considers how visual cultures are drawn into the process of making home for South Asian women in Britain (2004). Paying particular attention to materialities, she highlights how: “In the process of collecting and displaying visual and material cultures, South Asians build a sense of a home place. The display of materials such as photographs and mementos connect individuals to people, places and landscapes in ways which inform the sense of self” (Tolia-Kelly 2004: 677). Here materiality matters because it is selective. Migration often necessitates the disposal of objects prior to movement through regional space, and therefore “the value of those few objects preserved is enhanced in the process of their appropriation and display” (Tolia-Kelly 2004: 679). In this way, Tolia-Kelly argues that photographs and paintings mark carefully curated material connections to life elsewhere, and engage embodied memories of these histories.

Though such objects are connected to distant locations and past homes, they also create present ones. As Wiles notes, for some migrants home is defined by “having all your bits and pieces around” or owning furniture (2008: 130). Walsh elaborates on these dynamics in her study of British expats in Dubai (2006). Home for her is “both a space of imagined belonging and a lived space” (2006: 125). Therefore, she looks at banal items such as kitchen bowls and DVDs of television series in order to highlight how migrants actively engage with materiality as part of the process of “reconceptualiz[ing], re-creat[ing], and reliv[ing]” home abroad (Walsh 2006: 138). Dwelling continues after migration, and material interactions remain an important focus for understanding migrants’ homes.

While discussing the multiplicity of homes often reinforces how migrants traverse regional space, discussing interactions with objects in multiple regions broaches another spatial dimension. Here the relationships between people and things are of importance, and these relationships can demonstrate continuity through many spaces. Nowicka suggests that home can be understood as a “heterogeneous network” that, drawing upon the tradition of actor-network theory, includes both “humans and non-humans equally” (2007: 81). Home is not just a specific location, but “is something that one constructs,” “an entity in becoming” that centers upon family and the objects linked to family life (Nowicka 2007: 77). When families move abroad, or even when people are travelling away from home on business, objects can form a central part of the network of home:

To have such objects with you helps you to feel at home even in a hotel room. Some of the things that interviewees take with them on their trips are to remind them of daily practices of home and of their family, for example a pair of thick pyjamas, pictures of their nearest and dearest, their laptop, and so forth. (Nowicka 2007: 78)

The transnational workers that Nowicka studies are not necessarily ‘away’ from home, as a regional analysis would suggest. They take networks of home with them, and find opportunities for dwelling on the move. Networks of objects become mobile networks of home, no matter one’s regional location.

While this understanding of networks of home provides one means of articulating how mobile people and things relate, it fails to fully acknowledge their potential to change. Networks of home move across regional space, but they do not always hold together in the same way. That is, the networked people-things that make up home can change over time. They are more akin to the *Bluenose II* or the bush pump de Laet and Mol discuss (2000), in that their elements and boundaries can change significantly before this fluidity destroys their status as ‘home’. Indeed, since disposal is often a necessary part of migration, the mobility of migrant homes can be contingent upon their intermittent fluidity.

Migrant homes are therefore not just about consistent network relations, but about how networks change, adapt and vary over time and space. In this way, like things themselves, networks of people and materialities are enacted and contingent, assembled and disassembled (Gregson *et al.* 2010). Networks, like objects, need not be treated as immutable entities; they “eventually start to come apart, economically and physically, symbolically and socially” (Gregson *et al.* 2010: 853). Even a built house “is not a fixed entity: typically it is a building that is renovated many times through its life” (Nansen *et al.* 2011: 696). While people can try to prevent material configurations from coming apart – for instance by spending many hours maintaining wooden boats (Jalas 2005) – or hasten it – by repurposing the furniture from old ships (Gregson *et al.* 2010) – their ultimate temporariness remains.

A longitudinal approach is therefore useful – one which interrogates how the constant presence of materialities in migrants’ lives is marked by transformations as they move from pre-migration preparation through migrant journeys, life in a new location, and later returns. Considering how networks of materials come together and come apart over the course of migration recognizes that the nuances of social processes are constituted by transformations in material relations as much as by stabilities. The next section therefore turns attention to how more fluid configurations of home emerge through interactions with networks for travel.

**Fluid homes and managing networks for travel**

While many studies only pay attention to migrant materiality after people leave their home countries, the process of preparing to leave is a significant phase of migration. As Burrell suggests, “the journeys migrants make *are* their migration projects”, and therefore the materialities of these journeys have much to say about migration (2008: 370). Before crossing international borders or changing residential status, migrants must reorganize the materialities of their everyday lives. What should become of the things that have filled their homes and facilitated their routines? What should become migrant with them? While these negotiations are directed towards a future home, they are not yet about making home – at least not in the sense of enacting material practices of dwelling. The preparations people make before migration are not about re-enacting and re-enforcing existing networks of home, but about imaginative projections of future practices onto as-yet-unknown places.

Preparing to migrate is in this way about preparing for networks of home, but at the same time about building networks of another type – “mobile practice networks” (Hui 2012). Mobile practice networks are human and nonhuman networks, but temporary and intermittent ones that are focused around realizing objects’ mobilities. In many cases objects cannot move on their own, and therefore temporary coalitions of suitcases, boxes and moving professionals are created to help materials migrate alongside people. While moving through regional space, mobile practice networks remain intact, but after arrival they are deconstructed – things are put away and take on different relationships within homes. Assembling networks for travel across regional space thus involves negotiating the fluidity of homes and the anticipation of practices that go on in them.

Looking at how Hong Kong return migrants refined the networks of objects that would travel with them, it became clear that many introduced new items, as a result of imagining the differences to be found in other regional spaces. People projected forward to what their life might look like elsewhere, what they might be doing, and the objects that they would need. Creating networks for travel can thus provide an opportunity to introduce new items into networks of home. Those who moved to Canada, for instance, often spoke of buying what they imagined to be climate-appropriate garments – wool underwear, fur coats, and ski pants. Imagining the things that they might need was also tied to imagining new practices that they would like to engage in. As Shove et al. discuss, people can purchase things “in order to *induce* new practices” (2007: 34). When asked how she anticipated what she would need in Canada, Patricia responded:

I just imagined . . . I maybe go there, I have leisure time, what will I do? So I think of tennis because in Canada they have [a] very big place, maybe not [as] expensive as Hong Kong. [In] Hong Kong the tennis court may be more expensive, so Canada may be cheaper. So we think we better buy the tennis racket. (Patricia)

The movement of some new objects is therefore aspirational, in that it represents people’s intentions to change their everyday routines in a new location.

At the same time that networks for travel can include items intended to prompt different practices, they also include items that will help to continue familiar ones like eating and cleaning:

we ordered quite a few Chinese furniture first, like those rosewood furniture because it will be very difficult to buy in Canada and we were emotionally attached to some of the Chinese stuff (Sandy)

people tell us that they might be very expensive, buying something in Canada, so we just buy a lot of plastics and stuff, and utensils and stuff . . . we bought a lot of tissue paper and some batteries . . . I bought a big box of towels (Lavender)

While for Sandy new items were linked to sentimental attachments and anticipated processes of transnational dwelling, for other participants the process was marked by a concern for minimizing inconvenience, expense, and frustration after arrival, rather than creating meaningful ties to Hong Kong. Such concern for the practicalities of provisioning and the ability to continue mundane routines in new locations provides an important but sometimes overlooked counterpoint to discussions of sentimental object attachments (e.g. Tolia-Kelly 2004; Walsh 2006). After all, as Vicki noted, preparations can be marked by absurdity: “I probably brought like instant noodles with me. As if they don’t sell them in the [United] States (Vicki)”. Things like instant noodles, towels and batteries are included within networks for travel not because they will be longstanding reminders of home, but because they are regularly used and used up, and are therefore important to the continuation of everyday routines in a different home.

In addition to including things that can be quickly and unsentimentally used up, migrants pack objects that are used less often at home than in public spaces. When Lisa left Hong Kong to study in Canada, her mom sent three bulk packages of pocket-sized facial tissue with her, and continued bringing more every time she visited. Since tissue is widely available for purchase in Canada, there was no practical need behind this preparation. Yet it reflected the importance of tissues to everyday practices and social networks in Hong Kong. In addition to being used at restaurants, not all of which provide napkins, tissues are invaluable in toilets where the provision of toilet rolls and paper towels is inconsistent, as well as when hiking or out in the hot sun, in order to dry sweat from one’s face. Lisa suggested that it is possible to use two packs of tissues in one day, and she always carries them because they provide “a feeling of security, because maybe you don’t know when you will use it”. As well as being used in public spaces, tissues become a part of social interactions, and sharing tissues with others is widespread in Hong Kong. Jill noted how she “grew up with my whole family offering tissues”:

I have a huge family of cousins and we tend to stick together. So, as we grow up we would meet almost 5 times a year just at festivals or whatever. And so, it would be common practice for someone to put the pack of tissue on the table for them to pass around to everybody. And we would use that instead of whatever the restaurant would give you. (Jill)

As these examples show, tissues travel widely through Hong Kong’s public spaces, and carrying them is a widespread routine. Yet it was only after having moved to other countries, and noticing that tissues do not have a similar social role elsewhere, that Lisa and Jill began seeing these objects as meaningfully tied to Hong Kong. Not only then are homes marked by fluid sets of materials, but these materials also have shifting meanings within different networks, which encompass public spaces as well as private ones.

While previous studies have highlighted how the acquisition and disposal of materials relates to the creation of meaningful migrant homes (Tolia-Kelly 2004; Walsh 2006), this research suggests that significant variation exists in the meanings, longevity, and spatialities of use for the objects migrants bring with them. As Tolia-Kelly notes, not everything can be moved (2004), and limitations on the size of networks of travel create complicated tradeoffs between networks for travel and networks of home. When Jill was preparing to leave Hong Kong for university in the UK, she and her mother purchased a wide range of objects: the specialized tools that she would need for her fine arts degree and the household items that would give her dorm room a “home signature”. Yet when they got to the airport, her luggage was overweight:

My mom had already brought a bag to pack some stuff in that I couldn’t take on the plane. . . . I remember being, you know, you half feel guilty because your mother has helped you pack your suitcase and she wants you to bring what you need. So I was taking stuff out like hangers, <chuckles> you know. It’s embarrassing but I was almost numb to it, because you know, it seems a waste to leave it at home when she had bought it especially, so it’s embarrassing. (Jill)

As Jill’s anecdote illustrates, the networks assembled for travel face challenges and constraints – restrictions on the weight of airplane luggage, as well as regulations about what objects can be transported across borders and safeguards to ensure that objects remain undamaged and functional after their travels. When Jill was in the airport, trying to decide what to leave behind, she was struggling with creating appropriate mobile practice networks that would allow her things to get to the UK. Simple clothes hangers became affectively charged because they embodied the mismatch between the vision of home her mother helped her to create and the mobile practice networks that were required to move her things.

At other times, however, ample resources prevent networks for travel from coming into conflict with the transfer of networks of home to new regions. After university in the US, Vicki moved to the UK for work, and her employer paid for all of her relocation fees, as well as her flat in London. Since there were no financial limits constraining the shipping of her belongings, or the size of her flat, Vicki could take all of her stuff: “I had absolutely no incentive to trash anything because everything was paid for. So I moved my whole apartment to London basically”. In this case, financial resources made it unnecessary to renegotiate or selectively hone networks of home to fit networks for travel. Indeed, networks for travel were able to expand to accommodate all of the things in her home.

This discussion has highlighted several dynamics affecting sets of materials and how they change over the process of migration. It has shown how the process of compiling networks for travel involves not only already-meaningful objects, but also those that have not been used, are likely to be used up quickly, or are most important in public spaces. Moreover, considering these objects highlights the changing spatial relations affecting sets of migrants’ materials. Networks of home lose and gain objects to become networks for travel, which then retain their relations during transit through regional space but take on new forms after arrival. Homes are therefore not continuous in network space, but come to occupy more fluid space as they transform in relation to new expectations, objects and practices.

When establishing new homes after migration, migrants’ relationships to materials change once again as they attempt to successfully create networks of use, which are examined in the next section. It looks more closely at how infrastructures in new regions of residence affect the creation of networks after arrival. In doing so it considers the networks that come together in use – and how the things that migrants bring with them can (or cannot) be linked with other materialities when they are put to use. The focus is thus not on symbolic links to previous homes, but on how migrants perform material links in current ones.

**Local infrastructures, material contexts, and networks of use**

As Walsh notes, discussions of the symbolic aspects of migrants’ objects have been too seldom coupled with a recognition of their everyday use (2006). Material things are incorporated into the practices of everyday life, wherein they have particular functions and meanings, and draw upon skills and knowledge in the pursuit of specific aims. Whether these practices are banal and routine or more explicitly cultivated and complex, they help to reproduce and transform the structures of our days and our societies (Reckwitz 2002; Giddens 1979; Bourdieu 1977). But the accomplishment of practices is not without difficulties, and neither are objects always in use. While previous studies of the materialities of migrant homes have demonstrated how things become part of routines of dwelling, they largely overlook the things that do not get used. By doing so, they fail to consider how objects themselves may not be able to adapt or integrate into the routines and practices at new homes in different regional spaces. Attention therefore needs to be paid to both use and disuse, in order to recognize how material absences and material failures affect the constitution of migrant lives.

After migrants arrive in a new country, the mobile practice networks they established are dismantled, at least for the time being, and things take up new positions in network space. Through the process of unpacking boxes and suitcases, objects become available for use in conjunction with other networks of materials. But as participants admitted, this potential is not always realized. Many participants could recall one or more objects that, while carefully selected to migrate with them, remained unused.

In some cases, disuse occurred because migrants failed to take up the practices they had imagined. Patricia, for instance, never took up tennis after arriving in Canada: “we placed [the tennis rackets] in our basement for a long time and when we moved back [to Hong Kong], we brought it back”. In this case, owning the rackets was not enough to prompt Patricia to take up this new activity.

At other times, however, disuse occurred because the objects themselves simply didn’t fit in. As Shove et al. note, “practices are organized by, through, and around a physical landscape of material possibilities” (2007: 37). Therefore, when migrants arrive in a new location their everyday practices are affected not only by the objects that they bring along with them, but also by the landscape of materialities they encounter. Whether or not things can (continue to) be useful depends on whether effective networks can be formed with local material environments and infrastructures. Networks of use in this way must be formed between migrants’ mobile materialities and the situated infrastructures and material contexts that facilitate objects’ usefulness. Where infrastructures and contexts are not appropriate, networks of use cannot be formed.

For Frances, wool underwear seemed like a good purchase to protect against cold weather on the Canadian prairies. Upon arrival, however, she realized that they were of little use: “I didn’t need that because it really doesn’t fit in the interior where the houses, the buildings are all warmed, has the heating”. This question of ‘fit’ is a crucial issue in migrants’ everyday lives. Frances’ woolen underwear proved useless in Canada because there was a fundamental mismatch with infrastructures of housing and heating. In Hong Kong, high-rise apartment buildings are often built of concrete and have no built-in heating systems, so cold outdoor weather creates a cold indoor climate that is best addressed through warm clothes and occasional space heaters. But in Canada, where many areas face long, snowy winters, houses have been built to have distinctly different indoor climates. Central heating, wood framing, and reasonably priced utilities make it quite easy to keep indoor temperatures consistent and warm. In this indoor context, wool underwear no longer has an important purpose. The infrastructures of everyday practice make it redundant. The potential usefulness of things like wool underwear can therefore only be realized as part of particular networks of use. This highlights that the ability to move objects through regional space does not ensure that they will be able to form appropriate networks in different locations. The material configurations that are required to exploit objects’ functionalities may not be fluid or easily adapted to local situations.

Patricia provided another example - in preparation for her move to Canada she bought a wheeled shopping cart for transporting heavy purchases when walking back from the store. She anticipated it might be useful because “you don’t have to drive [to the supermarket] every time; but finally we drive every time so the cart, we didn’t use it”. Here the infrastructure of Canadian residential and retail spaces, car-friendly cities, and unfavorable winter weather for walking diminish the importance and utility of a small, wheeled shopping cart. Though such carts are routinely used in Hong Kong, after moving through regional space, the cart is less successfully networked with local infrastructures.

Getting used to migrant life thus involves learning about how your mobile objects fit into local material contexts, and adapting imagined practices into realistic and situated ones. Even if migrants have the wealth to bring objects with them to another country, instigating this flow does not mitigate against the possibility that objects may not fit in with local infrastructures. Discontinuities in networks of use therefore highlight an entirely different way that objects become tied to and indicative of a specific home. Wool underwear and wheeled shopping carts become tied to the specific infrastructures of Hong Kong by virtue of being more useful there, and their lack of fit in Canada indicates that networks of use are not always as fluid or easy to move across regional space as homes are.

**Managing multiple networks upon return migration**

The picture of evolving human-material relationships painted thus far is one of both imagined and enacted networks. Migrants, in preparing to mobilize an already-established network of home, must curate their things, selecting amongst those already owned and those that can be purchased. In doing so, they balance the material needs of their imagined future practices and the practicalities of forging networks for travel. A variety of other factors, including interpersonal co-constructions of imagined homes, and the financial constraints of moving can also complicate this process. After arrival, migrants explore how new material landscapes affect their networks of use – both inside and outside of the home. Sometimes imagined practices cannot be enacted because things do not fit with local infrastructures. Therefore some objects fall into disuse, while other more fitting ones might be purchased.

In the case of return migrants, however, the story does not end here. For a variety of reasons, they eventually find themselves contemplating a return to Hong Kong, and a repetition of this process. Again they must figure out what things to be mobile with and what imagined homes and practices they foresee in the future. Those such as Frances and Patricia, who were initially unsure about the permanence of their return, left some possessions stored in Canada – with family, and in the house she still owned there, respectively. Yet leaving things behind wasn’t appealing for Jill. Despite friends’ offers to store her things, Jill shipped or gave away everything she had in the UK because she “didn’t want too many strings attached” and wanted to “go one place at a time”. Other migrants got rid of many of their possessions, knowing that they would be returning to very small apartments with little storage space. Sandy, for instance, recalls shipping over 100 boxes to Canada when she first emigrated, but only moving back about 30 boxes. Similarly, Vicki had to “trash up a lot of stuff [upon her return] because I didn’t know how big my apartment would be in Hong Kong because Hong Kong has such tiny space”. While knowledge of the material infrastructures of Hong Kong can assist in imagining new networks of home, it does not necessarily make the task of selecting which things to move any easier.

After arrival, migrants’ networks can go through further periods of fluidity. Though their previous experience in Hong Kong reduces the surprises they encounter in terms of the built landscape and its implications for use, they can face new problems in familiar spaces. In many instances, participants adopted practices and routines during their time abroad that were not easily integrated into networks of use in Hong Kong. Sandy, for instance, came to love gardening while living in Canada. Yet in Hong Kong, space constraints make personal gardens problematic. So as a result, Sandy is left missing “my flowers, my roses, my tulips and my tomatoes”. Similarly, Vicki and Jason took up golf while living abroad, but now find it both inconvenient and costly to visit one of the few nearby golf courses: “I was in Boston before – I needed to drive 15 minutes and it was like $15 a game [~115 HKD]. Now, I need to go to China, and it’s like easily a thousand bucks Hong Kong a game [~130 USD] and it’s like a full day event” (Vicki). How homes and the materials within them are used can also be quite different after returning to Hong Kong. For Jill, Frances, Anthony, and Sandy it is potlucks – private gatherings where friends all bring a dish to a shared meal – that are missed. Hong Kong apartments are often too small to host such events, and a culture of eating out in restaurants and having domestic helpers further discourages them. Jill spoke about how she missed “conveniently going to people’s houses”, something she did when living in the UK. Since she and many of her single friends in Hong Kong live with extended family, she noted that people aren’t comfortable to just say “Are you free? Let’s cook dinner and chill out”. The configuration of material infrastructures and social relations in Hong Kong – apartment buildings and intergenerational households, restaurants and domestic helpers – in this way affects the ability to continue practices taken up while abroad.

These examples highlight how the transformations and adaptations of everyday life over the course of return migration are strongly influenced by material contexts and constraints. Living in multiple places, and adapting to the opportunities and constraints of local material landscapes, changes people’s understandings of how different types of networks might be constructed. Though return migrants may come back to a previous home in regional space, it is not always possible or desirable to maintain the same networks of home upon return. In addition, depending on local infrastructures and material contexts, networks of use can take on quite different forms – making it possible but less convenient to make use of objects like golf clubs. Human-material relationships and networks therefore demand negotiation and moments of fluidity whether migrants move to familiar or unfamiliar regional spaces.

**Topologies of human-material interaction in return migration**

This paper has illustrated how embracing multiple social topologies can enrich discussions of migrant-material interactions. The “intermittently mobile material worlds” (Sheller and Urry 2006: 211) of social life operate in regional space, but also in network and fluid space. Acknowledging these characteristics, and their interactions, brings additional dimensions to considerations of migrants and materialities.

This paper has contributed to the development of a vocabulary for discussing material migrations in several ways. Firstly, it expanded existing discussions of networks of home by arguing that they become fluid over time, and often include disused and largely practical objects as well as used and sentimentally important ones. More specifically, identifying networks for travel (mobile practice networks) and networks of use highlighted that material configurations not only emerge and disassemble, but also interact with each other in imagined and enacted forms.

The components of each of these networks affect how it moves through regional space. Networks for travel are compiled in order to move easily, and their relationships come apart once travel has been accomplished. Fluidity is therefore not desirable once these networks have been established, as any change in transit could jeopardize the project of traversing regional space. Networks of home, on the other hand, are intermittently fluid, and fluidity can be a precondition for changing regions. Networks of home demonstrate more fluidity than networks of use. Due to their links to local material infrastructures, networks of use can sometimes be impossible to take across regional space, and therefore one object may become part of quite different networks of use in different regional spaces.

This highlights a second issue – relationships with mobile materialities often presuppose relationships with immobile ones. This applies to a consideration of networks of use, and how the functionality of many objects is linked to the material contexts in which they reside. It is also apparent in a consideration of how imagined networks and practices compare to actualized ones. Part of the reason that migrants end up with gaps between their imagined material needs and actual ones is because they cannot anticipate minutiae of the material landscapes they will be living in, or how these differ from current contexts. As a result, imaginations of the future can involve extrapolations of familiar environments that are not apparent until embodied encounters make them explicit. Where migrants move is therefore a factor affecting how people-material networks evolve, with the UK offering different networks of use than Canada. But it also matters a great deal where migrants come from. Assumptions about regions and the infrastructures they contain shape the process of migrating with things.

Finally, by taking up the case of return migration, this paper has highlighted that migrant adaptation and integration are material processes, not only interpersonal ones. The process of migration is wrapped up in cultural adaptation, and transnational connections, but also longitudinal engagements with one’s possessions and how they fit into imagined and actualized routines. Relationships between mobile people and things therefore continue to evolve even after returning to familiar places because intervening experiences have transformed assumptions about homes and everyday practices.

Just as studies of migration have benefitted from looking beyond national interests, institutions, and frames, looking beyond regional space valuably extends studies of migrant materialities. As this paper has demonstrated, engaging with considerations of human-material networks and their intermittent fluidity brings further contributions to discussions of how materials matter in the process of moving and living abroad. Though this paper has focused predominantly upon everyday aspects of these human-material interactions, its approach could be extended to consider practices within political and social institutions, thereby expanding understandings of how materialities affect the ongoing transformations of migrant worlds.

**Endnote**

1 Participants were contacted through a snowballing procedure and were strategically sampled to achieve variation in several characteristics, including gender, age, number and duration of migration episodes, and initial purpose of migration. A research assistant was co-interviewer for several interviews, and transcribed all of the interviews. Both she and the author, as migrants living with temporary visas in Hong Kong, had personal experience with the process of moving materials being discussed.

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