Ethnologists, anthropologists, and scholars from other disciplinary backgrounds engaged in the study of material culture have produced theoretically advanced work concerning objectification, consumption, identity, and social memory. While there is growing interdisciplinary interest in material culture, however, transnational migrants’ material practices have seldom been in focus (see, e.g., van der Horst 2006; Salih 2003; Werbner 2000). This article is based on an ongoing project entitled “The Transnational Life of Objects: Material Practices of Migrants’ Being and Belonging”, a project that promotes an interest in studies of transnational migration that has thus far been less pronounced, namely in objects that criss-cross transnational social spaces of migrants’ own making. Indeed, “the object-turn” (Woodward 2001:117) is fruitful for the field as it adds important perspectives to research on migrants (see Burrell 2008; Ho and Hattfield 2011; Dudley 2011) and implies the need for the ethnographic approach that is unsurpassed in the ability to reach and represent the individual level of experience and the everyday dynamics of sense-making.

Not all migrants engage in practices that transgress national borders, but many do, in a variety of active and passive ways, with changed intensity, at different ages, and at diverse moments of their migration history. Many migrants tend to be embedded in transnational social spaces and their lives tend to “incorporate daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1003). Inasmuch as people’s activities are sustained by or inscribed in a particular materiality, the objects in this article are explored as elements of material foundations of migrants’ lives that traverse locations across state borders.

The principal interest pursued here is not in objects as generators of feelings and cultural meanings, but in the roles objects play in animating material practices (see Woodward 2001). Objects can be important for reasons of personal attachment, practical usefulness, or their “everydayness” in a person’s life – regardless of where that life is being enacted. Objects might be recycled, replaced by other objects, or replicate the arrangements from some other locations; they have, however, one important effect in common: by being used, or by merely being present, objects bestow continuity in migrants’ practices and in places. Importantly, the analysis attempted here goes beyond the issues of “feeling at home”; it seeks to shed light on how objects establish palpable connections between people and places.

Furthermore, in discussing individuals’ practices pertaining to the sphere of the home, this article goes against mainstream studies of transnational migration by not grappling with migrants as members or representatives of ethnic, national, diasporic or any kind of institutionalized groups.

The following sections outline a theoretical framework that pertains to the importance of looking at material aspects of migrants’ everyday life in transnational contexts and explaining the methodological choices. The subsequent sections present ethnographic examples and analyse the significance of particular objects
with regard to everyday practices and the recreation of home. Specifically, this article delineates how objects are intertwined with memories and practical uses, are carried across borders from “here” to “there” and back because they appeal to people’s acquired taste, and reconfirm social ties in space and time. The last two sections summarize the analysis and reinforce the argument about objects making palpable connections in migrants’ transnational lives.

Theoretical Framework: The Salience of Materiality and the Ways of Being

For ethnographers interested more in the mundane than in the symbolic and representational, objects of everyday use are of special interest. The meanings of such objects intertwine with the ways in which they are used and the ways in which they embody people’s inclusions in different locations and contribute to the (re)production of social ties; ties that are viewed here as “folded into the materiality of things” (Pels et al. 2002:17). Moreover, when an object is so much in use that daily life without it has become inconceivable (or when it is so taken for granted that it is no longer “noticed”), it does not make sense as a sign, but rather as part and parcel of subjectivity (Warnier 2001:21). A praxeological approach to material culture, then, does not elucidate what material culture means but instead what it does to, and for, migrants: especially in terms of producing palpable connections between distant locations. The experiential ground – defined by the materiality of the world around us – is what brings things, social relations, and identities together.

As the approach pursued here prioritizes “home” as an empirical, experiential category, we focus on objects’ constitutive effects “within the entangled networks of sociality/materiality” (Pels et al. 2002:2). Objects, here, are seen as “things to hold on to”, that help migrants to deny or overcome segregation between different locations in relevant social spaces. In creating connection and a sense of continuity “even the most emptied-out, banal objects of […] domestic material culture have a role to play” (Woodward 2001: 134). Indeed, the examples below refer mostly to home-making practices and the use of objects in the domestic sphere – to ways of being in transnational social spaces.

In conceptualizing the simultaneity of migrants’ lives in transnational social spaces, Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004) distinguish between ways of being – the actual social relations and practices in which individuals engage in their everyday lives, and ways of belonging – practices that signal or enact identity and demonstrate a conscious connection to a particular group. While belonging combines “action and an awareness of the kind of identity that action signifies” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1010), being in a social space does not necessarily mean that people identify with labels, cultural politics, or any representations associated with that space. One can lead a transnational life without ever signalling or enacting one’s ethnic identity (see Povranović Frykman 2012); it is a matter of interpreting if and when an object of daily use can also be used to display belonging. The examples in this article mostly encompass objects
that were not used by their owners to display their ethnic affiliation – at least not while in contact with the researcher. What the objects discussed below might symbolize is not of primary relevance here; instead the focus is on objects’ habitual use that remains uninterrupted in lives that are stretched between different locations.

An illustrative example is found in the autobiographical essay the second author wrote in connection with the project mentioned above (see note 2). He is American, in his late twenties, married to an Italian woman, studied in France for one year and lived in Italy for three years before settling in Sweden, where he has lived for two years:

There are not many objects that I and we bring in moving about places. One for sure, is the *espresso moka* – a non-electronic espresso making device that is used on a stove. Since meeting my wife everyplace I’ve gone I’ve taken it with me. I developed a taste for it, it is more tasty than American coffee. After a bit I stopped taking it to USA because I bought one for my mom so I used hers when I went back home. My mom doesn’t use it in the US, she tried it but doesn’t like it. It just sits in the kitchen unused until we visit. It is also always with us when we go camping, or when we travel to a place that has a kitchen or burner. Some other objects that stand out are my computer, my wii, and my books. Every place I have been in the past few years I have had them with me. My computer is probably the most important object I have. Because I have moved so many times in the past years the importance of a cell phone or TV have virtually gone away. To communicate with friends I use my computer (skype, e-mail, etc.). It is one of the few things that are consistent in my life. In fact, it has broken twice in the past few years, and I realized how dependent on the computer I had become because of it. I use it for so many things, watching old TV shows while exercising, communicating with friends, watching movies with my wife, finding recipes to cook with, finding music, etc., that without it I felt a bit naked.

The objects singled out in this excerpt have different functions in this migrant’s life. Because mobile telephone subscriptions are territorially bound and therefore very costly for transnationally mobile people, the computer became a central device of communication with significant others across borders. Its practical function as a connector, indeed, an experiential “unifier” of a transnational space is thus paramount. However, several other functions of this object are mentioned as vital that are not specific to migrant experience. Also, while the choice and the provenance of films or television programmes this migrant watches via his computer would perhaps tell something about his and his wife’s transnational lives, they are not relevant in the discussion of objects as material facilitators of transnational connections. On the other hand, the practice of carrying a particular coffee-maker (“for sure… everyplace I’ve gone”) demonstrates a strong preference for a particular type of coffee (acquired since the start of a transnational relationship with his wife), but also the perceived importance of keeping the habit of consuming the “right” type of coffee regardless of the location in which it is enacted. This makes the espresso maker an example of highly relevant data in the context of the research presented in this article.

What is especially interesting is the issue of replicating or duplicating the use of a utensil both “here” and “there” in the transnational space. The research material gathered in the wider project suggests that
keeping the same kind of utensil in each location in which migrants organize their everyday life is rather common. Kitchen utensils such as teapots, coffee-makers, knives, and mugs were often given as examples (see Povranović Frykman 2012). Such objects ensure the uninterrupted pleasure and smoothness of everyday practices of cooking and eating in a preferred manner while avoiding the trouble of transportation. In the example above, the “proper” start of the day is secured, as the smell, sound, and taste produced by the coffee-maker create a particular sensual environment in any place this device is used: on regular workdays, on tourist trips as well as at family visits; in this migrant’s homes in Italy, Sweden, and the US.

While this vignette illustrates the kind of issues focused upon and the analytical approach pursued, it also brings to the foreground the main questions discussed in the article: how do people make choices, exercise agency, and create normalcy and continuity with the help of objects? Which objects do they see as important for allowing them to keep certain practices? Which are pointed out as unique for a particular place and thus require to be brought from there? Which are simply liked and seen as useful? Finally, which objects are cherished because they materialize significant social ties?

The following section presents the research participants and explains the methodological choices made in the project.

**A Praxeological Approach: Methodological Choices**

The material presented below has been gathered within the framework of a wider exploratory ethnographic research project (see note 2) that also touches upon questions concerning people’s agency, place-making, representation, and involves both migrants’ perspectives and the perspectives of those who stayed behind. In this article, however, attention is devoted only to migrants’ experiences and to the objects respondents themselves chose to show and explain to the researcher. They are relevant as research data on the grounds that
they are seen as relevant by the research participants who were asked about the transnational routes of objects they acquire, use, or keep in different locations. The private sphere of the home, in general, and the material practices of homemaking in particular, is a primary venue for research into migrants’ ways of being. While the home is a classical ethnographic site for examining the connection between the domestic space and larger social and economic systems, here the home is seen in a specific context of transnational migration. For migration imposes an awareness of the tension between geographical mobility and domestic fixity. Everydayness “loses its appearance of innocence and stability, when the routine homemaking practices become more intentional, when the ‘everyday’ becomes not so everyday and the ‘mundane’ takes on a new significance” (Kurotani 2007:28) in a different place. The affective qualities of places and the related sense of incorporation cannot be separated from the concrete materialities of houses, rooms, kitchen tables, and all the objects that make places one’s “own” (see Povrzanović Frykman 2009, 2011).

The primary purpose of this article is to present a praxeological approach that intersects with ethnology, migration research, and studies of material culture. The ethnographic examples are limited to a few research participants who come from different countries but have a similar socio-economic background. They all work as medical doctors in southern Sweden and enjoy a relatively privileged financial situation. While the wider project attempts comparisons that take into consideration issues of class, the choice of participants presented in this article speaks to a lack within migration studies of substantive empirical data for “a more fine-grained ethnographic analysis of the social and material practices of such privileged migrants” (Fechter 2007:34). The important comparison between economically advantaged and disadvantaged migrants has not been pursued here, but is pertinent inasmuch as migration studies tend to focus on less privileged people. Hence, this article also responds to the critique of “alterity and marginality automatically ascribed to migrants” (Raghuram et al. 2010:623).

The material is based on interviews and observations conducted by the second author in respondents’ homes in Malmö in 2011 (see note 2). Four medical doctors were interviewed, two women from Italy (Anna) and Romania (Elena), and two men, from Germany (Andreas) and Greece (Sebastian); the latter was interviewed together with his wife (Leyla) who comes from Turkey. All are married, but only Anna is married to a Swede. The interviews were conducted in English, the language mastered by all the respondents and the native language of the researcher. The names are changed, but the basic relevant personal information is presented below.

Anna is a 34-year-old Italian who had been living with her Swedish husband in Helsingborg and Malmö for more than three years. They regularly visit and receive visitors from Italy.

Elena is in her early forties. She arrived in Sweden from Romania in 1992 and for the first two years went home every summer, but has not returned to Romania since 1994. Instead, her parents visit her,
staying for several months and helping her and her husband with their three children. The husband is “half English, half Italian” and does research in Italy, so this family travels to Italy every summer and stays in a house shared with the brother’s family. Their transnational space also involves a destination in Denmark, where the husband’s brother and his Danish wife live with their children. Elena’s transnational social space thus encompasses four countries, although she has not returned to her country of origin for many years.

Andreas is German, in his late thirties, with a German wife and two young children. They have been living in a rented house in Malmö for several years. They visit their family in Germany regularly and often receive visitors from Germany as well.

Sebastian is thirty-six years old. He was raised in Greece but, having an Italian father, he moved to Italy in his late teens. He later moved to Sweden with his wife Leyla, an architect from Turkey. They have moved three times to different locations in Sweden. They travel back to their respective countries about once a year. His parents visit once or twice a year and only her mother visits once every two years.

**Everyday Practices and Recreating Homes**

To the question about objects in the home not acquired in Sweden, Sebastian mentioned his books and a map. Even if they are heavy, he “has to” take the books with him when moving; he prefers to read in Italian, and even if some of the books are old he likes to read them again and again. Referring to the map, he said his father had a similar one in Greece. He later bought one and “takes it with him everywhere”. Entitled *Bonia docet mater studiorum*, it is a reprint of a map of Bologna from 1663.

Sebastian’s map partially recreates a setting originally established by his father – an Italian living in Greece. It materializes an emotional connection that intersects with the experience of growing up in a home where a similar map was a part of the home decor. The books he cherishes connects him to his old home in Italy, to the wider Italian context of his life, where reading the books “again and again” engages him in a recurrent practice that is not specific to his present Malmö apartment, but to his preferred pastime in any place where his everyday life is situated. Sebastian also likes to cook: he has a collection of cookbooks in Greek, Italian, English, Swedish, and German. They signal not only his linguistic competences but also his multiple transnational inclusions. These books were acquired on tourist travels as well as travels home – to both Italy and Greece.

His wife Leyla mentioned her teapot as the most important object of everyday use, for it allows her to make tea in a way that she asserts is unique to Turkey. Similar to the coffee-maker in the introductory vignette, her choice refers to her habitual normality of enjoying tea, as it facilitates a familiar practice engaging one’s body and senses. It was engrained in Leyla while growing up in Turkey and enacted wherever she can use this or a similar teapot.

To the question of what in their Malmö apartment makes them feel at home, Sebastian answered “my ladies”, meaning
his wife and his baby daughter. Leyla instead said it was the television. She likes watching movies with her family. They download movies and watch them together. This is also how she relaxes. “No matter where I go, it is there,” she said. By this she did not refer to the same television set but to the continuity of a practice that requires television as a device, but has been the same in every location of her life.

Similar to Sebastian, Anna likes to read in her native language, and she is aware that the presence of Italian books makes her feel at home. Some of them are also related to her professional identity:

We can start from the books […]. I know that sometime I wonder why do I have so many books, but really it makes me feel at home. To have the Italian books when I feel like reading something I just pick it up and I read, so I really like having books. [What kind of books are they?] Novels. And then I have some books from school, some medical books, in Italian. They are not actually Italian but translated into Italian.

It is important for Anna to bring back books to Sweden after visiting Italy. She described a “tradition” of going to a local bookstore in her hometown where a friend of the family would give her advice on new books. Anna mentioned that the family friend has passed away now, so she no longer goes back to the bookstore, but she does still take books from the bookshelves in her parents’ home that perhaps she had bought in the past but never read. A practice originally emplaced in her Italian home is continued in her home in Sweden. This practice parallels Sebastian’s use of the map in order to recreate a part of the parental home.

Elena also spoke about her books. As a matter of fact, they are her most important possession from Romania.

Literature. Because when I came here my boy-friend had a flat that had everything in it and I was living with my parents in Romania so I could not just take the furniture. So I just had my clothes and my books and they were very important to me. Dictionaries, yeah, that was later, in the beginning just clothes and books. I think I have two bookshelves, the big ones that are mine, and five are my husband’s.

Her reasons for keeping the books are manifold, and include the sensual experience of smell and touch that can be related to Sebastían’s narrative about the joy of holding and rereading his books.

I can’t throw books away, it’s something stronger than me, I don’t know. Even books I haven’t touched for a long time, I still don’t want to, once I thought just to donate them to the library. But then I was hoping that my kids would want to read in Romanian, I don’t think so, they are much better in Italian than Romanian. If they are not traveling to Romania, I don’t think they will, not in the near future. […] I always like to read them, I like the smell of them, the ink and I um, I’m a little bit old-fashioned. Computers are okay but they don’t give me the same feeling […] and I like to underline.

In addition to being aware of the sensual experience contained in the books’ materiality, Elena also expressed how her books are an important link to Romania that might also become a link for her Swedish-born children. The analytical avenue of looking at objects as bearers of heritage is not pursued here. This, however, is a clear example of how experiences and concerns are “folded into the materiality of things” (Pels et al. 2002: 17). What is also apparent is this migrant’s awareness that competence (in using Romanian language) and practice (of reading the books) are central to how objects acquire meanings.
Emplacing Memorable Objects through Practical Use

When describing important objects that have travelled from Germany to Sweden, Andreas told the story of a wooden couch. The couch was bought and given to his wife by her parents. The couch can be converted into a bed and was in fact the first bed that Andreas and his wife owned when they began to live together. While the couch is old it has become important.

And there was a plan to throw it away and buy a new one, but not yet. […] My wife got it from her parents who had bought it from a co-worker. […] And when her parents come to visit us they always sleep on it. [So they are very familiar with this couch then?] Yes, they also realize that it is lasting and it is fine. Even if it’s old now and it’s not very comfortable. They still remember it, they have a memory of it.

The parents appear in this narrative as an active part of transnational space; their involvement in the fluid positioning of what is “here” and what is “there” is a particularly telling example of the character of transnational social space and its material underpinnings.

The coffee pot, on the other hand, is a part of his personal life-history. Andreas bought the pot from IKEA while living in a student house in Germany. However, once he tried to incorporate the coffee pot into his daily life he found it impractical and seldom used it. Even if it has not been used continuously, the pot has accompanied Andreas on his migration route:

So that was a long time in the… we didn’t use it. But it followed us here, and then here in this house, it was … the first time. […] So yeah, all the things that survived. My wife wants to throw it away, but it’s hard, and I spared it. Yes, really funny. [So it’s kind of reborn?] Exactly, yes, yes, reborn. [So do you use it?] Yeah, yeah, we use it, when we want to cook tea, we use it.

They both agreed on keeping and using the water-filtering device brought from Germany, of the kind that is commonly used in there.

The thing that we took with us was, a thing here. It’s a filter. We realized that if we got a new kitchen, now, at all the years this thing survived as well. [And why is that?] There is no reason to throw away. And in fact we use it because we want to have our water a little more filtered. Not have very much calc. So um, so we like it more when you go to drink it, we filter it. And um yeah, it’s funny...

Andreas also spoke about a storage cupboard that he and his wife bought together for their apartment in Germany. The couple brought the cupboard with them to Sweden where it took on new uses.

It was very practical… also today because it’s doesn’t look very nice, it’s more practical. But now, it’s in the room where children can play, you can put the legos there. And uh, they uh, take them and throw things in there and they can damage it. But it doesn’t hurt it. When the children are older we can think about buying a new, but now it’s perfect.

Andreas also has a cupboard he grew up with in his parental home in Germany.

I grew up with it. Now it’s in the cellar because we don’t have any other place to ah, a place. It’s a cupboard. When I was growing up it was in our kitchen and there was white paint. And then when I moved out to study I only took with me my books because the first time I moved to a student apartment and there was a yeah, a table. And I just needed my personal things. Then little later, I asked my dad if I might have it. And I did the same thing that I painted it and sanded it. So because I spent much time on it, I didn’t throw it away either.

Andreas and his wife have a lot of paintings that were given to them by the wife’s
parents that Andreas refurbished once in Malmö. Andrea’s father taught him how to refurbish and repair objects when he was younger. Andreas described the importance for him in having his tools from Germany in Sweden: he explained that, “I like to do things for my own. So I do not call a mechanic or other people very often.” Andreas enjoys doing odd jobs around the house, like hanging picture frames, and doing repairs, such as refurbishing the cupboard. He brought tools ranging in size from screwdrivers to a circular saw (a somewhat large electric saw). Once in Sweden he began to buy news tools, like a drill large enough to penetrate thick walls in order to continue to be able to do the same kind of repairs he used to do in Germany.

The objects and practices described here by Andreas act as a means to channel personal life histories, family relations, and embodied familiarity into a situated and practical everydayness. This everydayness forms a part of his tactile and sensual environment that allows for a daily experiencing of both “here” and “there”.

**Liking, Craving, Carrying: The Importance of Familiar Tastes**

As with many other participants in the project, having objects related to food consumption, both home-made and industrial, is paramount. Importantly, however, Andreas connects what is brought to the amount of space available in the house when first moving to Sweden. He expanded on how this has changed through time.

Also, we have changed our behaviour, in the beginning we took with us a lot of things. That was a time when we had… we didn’t have anything else […]. But now we use to look at what we can buy here um, bigger, electronic stuff we use to buy here because sometimes it’s necessary to change it, if it breaks down. The TV for example, okay, it’s a little cheaper in Germany but when it has troubles I can’t take it back. That’s the reason why we changed. But in the beginning, we did get more stuff, they [the parents, visiting from Germany] brought us a few, fruits and vegetables. But it was not because we cannot buy it here, they are… they want to bring us something. If you bring us something you cannot buy here mmmm, think, I have to think very much. No, not very much more than wine and beer.

The changes in what things are transported and the amount of things transported are related to changes in Andreas’ financial situation since moving to Sweden. In the beginning, it could be said that the family’s financial situation meant forced hierarchies in decisions that configured which kinds of objects should be from Germany and which could not. Through time the family went from decisions based on necessity to decisions, as with larger electronic devices, based on choice. Wine and beer are also a matter of choice, related to taste acquired while living in Germany.

Food often fills Anna’s luggage as well – on the way from Italy to Sweden.

A lot of food, cheese. A lot of cheese. Parmesan, and a lot of different kinds of cheese. Ham. And then food, it can be everything, chocolate. Turin is well known for having a lot of good chocolate. It can be polenta flower. It can be, eh, some desert. It can be olives, onions, once I bought small packages of onions in vinegar. When Franco and Stefano [Italian friends living in Sweden] were at my place they appreciated it a lot. They can’t find them here. So, food, I can tell you a long list.

Even if she eventually realized that many of those products can be obtained in Swe-
den, Anna still prefers to bring them from Italy.

You can find many things in Sweden, you can. But especially in the beginning I didn’t know how to find things. So, they make me feel at home with my things. It makes me feel, when I cook, and I have my things, I can do it better, with the oil, I bring a lot of wine, even if it’s very dangerous. The bottles can break, but we bring a lot of wine, because my daddy comes from a wine area. So, we have a lot of wine. And then, about the food, something special, the vinegar once I brought it and because I knew that it was good, so I brought a bottle of balsamic vinegar. And it can be, once I brought this, the pizza, ah, something to make pizza, and then I brought fresh pasta, it was so good. I bought it in Italy and then I brought it here to Sweden.

A personal preference for taste and quality is mentioned as the reason for using those products; they are not presented as “typically Italian”, or as “better than in Sweden”. Importantly, Anna calls them “my things”; as such, they make her “feel at home”. Anna’s husband, who is Swedish, loves insalata russa (a salad made from mayonnaise, carrots, etc.), so Anna “tries to remember” to bring it from Italy to Sweden if he is not with her. The liking, craving, and carrying are done in multiple directions, for multiple reasons and for the sake of different people embedded in this migrant’s transnational space.

Elena also mentioned home-made rose water to put on pastry or cakes. Yeah, they make it, it’s called rose water, it’s a typical dish from that region and you have to have this to season, to make it tasty. And you can’t find it anywhere, they only do it in that place. It’s a flower something, it’s very concentrated, one drop and that’s enough. [Do you have some at your house now?] I don’t have it because we bought it and gave it away as a present. [But you normally go and buy it and bring it back to Sweden?] Yeah, yeah, sometimes people ask us to bring something like cheese, or whatever… oil – food again, sorry!

She “apologized” for recurrently mentioning food; probably because she sees food as trivial. But she did add that they would bring more food from Italy when visiting once a year, but travelling by car is a problem: [We bring] peperoncino paste, fresh. Yeah, uh, the problem is we travel by car and it’s quite warm when we, it’s 2000 km, we can’t, otherwise I would come with salami like this. But we can’t.

In Elena’s kitchen, however, all but one device was acquired in Sweden. It was necessitated by a particular practice characteristic of cooking in Romania.

Yes, the only thing we didn’t have here, you know we make the aubergines in a certain way, you grill them whole on the plate. Then you peel them, and you put them in salt and let them take away the water. And then you need a certain hammer, it looks like this, it’s made of wood, has to be made
of wood otherwise it becomes greyish. So this I didn’t find and my mom took it up [from Romania]. It’s a lot of work but…

There is one more dish Elena craved for, at least in the first years of her stay in Sweden.

There is a special Romanian dish that is typical that you do in the autumn, sort of pickled, it’s very difficult and everyone is making it in the autumn and they put it in these small jars and they keep it all winter and then they boil it, it’s very difficult. […] It’s tomato, um, um, this pepper, aubergine, and onion and you boil it, but first you grill and then all together and it takes some days, to reduce it and then you put them in small jars and cook them so they are in a vacuum. So she [her mother], in the beginning – I missed it so much – sometimes she would bring it, but not lately.

She said she would never do it herself: “Forget it, it’s so many days for one dish”!

Having acquired the taste for it in Romania, she is the only one in the family who likes it, so the choice of not engaging in time-consuming preparation appears rational and pragmatic. However, she is sorry about not being able to recover the recipe and re-enact the joy of eating home-made ice cream that her grandmother taught her how to prepare: “She taught me to make an ice cream made of yoghurt, it was beautiful, and I lost the recipe. And I can’t remember, I’ve tried several times.”

The palpable “borders” of a migrant’s transnational space are defined by the extent to which significant others and objects can become emplaced in different contexts. The fluency with which they are contextualized in different locations can determine the level to which migrants can experience that their everyday practices are “normal” and occur without interruption. An element of interruption mentioned above is not caused by the loss of the recipe as such, but by the grandmother’s death.

From “Here” to “There”

Favourite food products are not transported only for the migrants’ taste or needs, but also because of family members who become transnational because of being related to a migrant. To her parents in Italy, Anna brings salmon, herring, and mustard from Sweden: “The one you have for Christmas, with a kind of seeds, and it’s so very good. That one they really love. And the bread, they have from Sweden, this knäckebröd.”

Anna said she was not used to taking many things from Sweden when flying back to Italy in order to visit her parents and her two sisters.

It’s just clothes, and then, I’m used to buying perhaps some presents for my sister. For example clothes during the winter time, things like hats, gloves, things like that, and otherwise some food […] And sometimes I bring things which I don’t use here. So for example I brought things I wanted to give to my sister, for example I brought her a helmet to go skiing with. I bought the helmet and I knew that I’m not going to use because it we don’t go skiing here. She uses it every weekend because she can go skiing. So I gave it to her and I told her when I go skiing again when I am in Italy, […] I will take it back.

While the choice of leaving the helmet in Italy is pragmatic and practical, it also materializes Anna’s inclusion and presence in the place she has left behind. Bought in Sweden but left in Italy, the helmet can be seen as embodying Anna’s presence in her sister’s place, and confirming an everydayness of the sisterly practice of sharing things.

Anna keeps many personal items at her
parent’s home in Italy; she brings used clothes from Sweden to Italy, the ones she might use there but seldom uses in Sweden.

If I have clothes or shoes I don’t use, because I really don’t like to throw away things. So if they are still nice and new, I do it. It can sound very ridiculous – bringing clothes from Sweden to Italy. My clothes, the clothes I’m going to use. I’m used to having a big bag because I’m used to bringing a lot of things on the way back to Sweden. […] I always have a big bag. On the way back it can be everything.

When going to Greece from Sweden, Sebastian brings along a cheese cutter, something he sees as typically Swedish, but that he also wants to keep using when away from Malmö. He is also now used to washing the dishes with a dish brush and using a sauce whisk; kitchen utensils he never used before coming to Sweden but now uses on a regular basis. Sebastian explained that for him the brush, the cheese cutter, and the whisk “are Sweden”.

Being raised in Greece and Italy, at first Sebastian stabbed the cheese because he didn’t know how to use the cutter in the intended manner. Now he uses it properly, on an everyday basis, and takes it home to give as a present to the family. He endorsed a new material practice that he tried to introduce to the counterparts in his transnational space. This “strategy” brings to mind the example described in the introduction concerning a favourite coffee-maker presented as a gift to a relative living in the US: that of emplacing an object of preferred everyday use in every household one inhabits transnationally under the pretext of a gift.

Sebastian also takes his snooze with him back home and on vacation. He quit smoking and started to use snus (moist oral snuff) in Sweden. He embodied a “Swedish” material practice and enacts it wherever he goes.

Elena and her family visit her brother-in-law’s family in Denmark some three times a year. When asked about what they give for presents from Sweden, she explained.
It’s not so formal. It’s not so formal. I know there is an Italian food shop in Copenhagen and we’ll go there first to buy the thing that we know we like. That we can’t find in normal shops… or whatever. Or a special hazelnut cream that is like Nutella, that is to die for. But, I like it three times as much and it’s so good. Called Jon Due. […] It’s a food shop, and Italians like food, even if I’m not Italian I love food, so… Food is very important to me. Um, yeah, food, wine…

She also brings along her children’s clothes to be used by their cousins in Denmark; she does the same when going to the house in Italy.

I like to recycle, I don’t like to throw away stuff. I like to keep stuff. I’m a… [she means a hoarder]. But clothes and stuff like this – just to throw them away? Or I will just bring them to kids I know that are the same age, or I just keep them for this, how do you call it… second-hand, for charity.

The recipients of her children’s clothes are also the children in the Italian village where they have a house. Elena developed a strategy for packing the car rationally and allowing her children’s clothes to circulate between Sweden and Italy:

[Do you have difficulties packing the car?] Yeah, sure. I always try to take clothes that are a little bit small. So I don’t have to bring them back; I just leave them there in my house so I don’t have to bring them to Sweden again. […] The kids’ clothes, shoes, for example, sandals. […] [If kids outgrow things and you leave them there, is there any use for them anymore?] No, no, no, they are full of kids in the village. So we can give them away. […] We have friends that have kids, and we, we’ve done so that I never throw away things. And I must say that I’ve been given things too.

By circulating, the clothes make relations between donors and recipients and create the classical bonds that gifts are supposed to establish. At the same time, they establish material connections between homes and families in Sweden and Italy.

Sharing across Borders, Sharing across Generations

While Anna talked about the presence of her books in Italian as important for her “feeling at home” in Sweden, another sort of objects – “a lot of things in the kitchen” – are also important in her home-making but are related to her identity as a daughter and granddaughter:

All, not all, but most of the pans, are from Italy. Because they were a present I got from mother for my marriage. But she got them a lot of years ago, she bought them earlier as they were very special, she thought. So when I moved here she gave them to me. It was a present, she bought them for me. But saved them, and she said when you get married you will have them. It was my mom [who bought them], but la mia nonna, my grandmother, she had them there [kept them at her place for five years]. So when I was living in Turin [while studying], she said no no no, that’s not marriage, but when I moved here it was like a marriage, so she said of course now you move with a guy. And I got the pans.

As a marital gift she also received two rugs, and two paintings from different family members. One of them was also a material connection to a home in Italy (echoing Sebastian’s narrative) where the painting was placed earlier.

One is from my sister and the other one is from my uncle. […] The uncle had it at home, he had it at his place and when I got married I got it. And my other sister bought the other one for me for my marriage. […] And I have bed sheets, which my mom had bought, they are hand sewn, with my name, with my grandma’s name, my mom’s name. [Did she have them made for you?] Some she did, for the most part she had, she had from her grandmother, from her mother, so I had all of the different names. Not the names but the initials. And then some with my initials. And then I have some which she bought without the initials. So I have bed sheets and then I have towels, very traditional things. [What do you call that in Italian?] Il
corredo, exactly, exactly. I had corrido, these things that were prepared for me when I was getting married. [Did she bring them here or did you bring them here?] I sent them here, I sent them. I sent them with, um how did you call it, il baule [the trunk]. I have two, one has been in USA with my granddaddy. With my granddaddy, who was in the US, with that one, because at that time, my granddaddy had immigrated to the US. And then he came back with that trunk to Italy.

This story about the traditional dowry transported from Italy to Sweden in an old migrant trunk may be a less standard one, but it is an excellent example of how objects, social relations, and identities together criss-cross space, but also time. They are shared across borders, but also across generations.

Anna, in fact, had two trunks that were originally her grandparents’ and passed down to her from her parents, one trunk from each side of the family. While the trunk from her immigrant grandfather had a “romantic” quality, both trunks had important family meaning and were used to transport Anna’s things from Italy. The two trunks served a practical function in that they were strong and able to protect her things; while the trunks were also items themselves connected to her family that she could use in her new home. After deciding to move to Sweden, then, and with the awareness that the move could last for a significant amount of time, Anna explained that she wanted to bring important items from Italy to fill her new home. She used the trunks to bring books, both medical books and novels, her dowry, and kitchen items. She did so because she “really wanted to begin to arrange” her home in Sweden. Anna described a series of other items, many of which were gifts from friends and family that she brought from Italy to use in her home in Sweden. The items included a Bimbi (a cooking device), cooking pans, including a special pan to make polenta (a kind of cornmeal), a lamp, a sideboard (for the bed), and curtains that were her used by both her grandmother and her mother.

These objects of everyday use Anna received as gifts. Some of them are carriers of memories connected to significant persons. Their surfaces carry “physical imprints or traces from the activities in which they are caught up” (Knappett
Such objects do not “stand for” someone in a symbolic way; they are affected by the physical use of a particular person and thus provide a material connection to that person. At the same time, they are practical and used in a pragmatic manner, to cook with, to lighten the room, or to shade the windows in Anna’s Swedish home.

Elena gave a different example of social ties extending in space and time. As mentioned above, she arrived in Sweden from Romania in 1992, but has not returned to Romania since 1994. A musical box that belonged to her late grandmother is the most important object from Romania Elena has in her Swedish home. It materializes their once close connection, but possibly also Elena’s childhood fascination with that very object. By being “here”, in her Swedish home, it connects Elena to a “there” of the many summers spent in the grandmother’s home and to a “then” of the time gone by.

**Necessity, Choice, and a Transnational Wastebasket**

All the people quoted in this article are relatively well-off and are currently not forced to make restrictive hierarchies of objects to be transported because of economic reasons (only due to the means of transportation). Affluent people may well be able to be transnational in more intense ways than those whose transnational practices demand economic sacrifices. Andreas’s experiences illustrate this intensity and its taken-for-granted character, while exemplifying the importance of (here, relatively small) physical distance between places involved in transnational connections.

He explained that his family from Germany habitually brings things to Sweden when visiting.

Yes, yes, both my parents and the parents of my wife take things here. That’s right. But it’s not always easy, because my dad has a little bigger car that can take more things. But you know, he always wants to bring things to the summer house [in Sweden]. So he already takes a lot of things to the summer house. So he doesn’t have so much place in the car. The other, times, they are only two who travel. So they can use the whole rest of the car.

Andreas further confirmed the frequent flow and volume of his family’s transnational traffic of objects.

It’s not always easy, the house is getting more and more full. We used to be able to find place, to get those things. But we have to see that we, um, throw away other things. But yeah, until now there was always some place we can put it. When asked what sort of objects his family from Germany brings, he said:

Okay, one thing is beer and wine. Other things… Very much toys for the children, yeah. This home-made marmalade. No, um, otherwise, the things we order.

Asked about the things he started to buy in Sweden instead of Germany, Andreas told about a practice that literally connected his everyday life in the two countries.

Uh, yes, it’s a quite strange example, with the waste basket. It’s what you put in first, I mean the plastic bags. You put in the plastic bags first, then you throw in the things, then you take the plastic bag and you throw it away. But the plastic bags we bought in Germany because I found that I knew where I could buy them, and then I realized that it’s quite stupid of me! I just have to go to the supermarket and find it, for that one time, and then I know, but for a few years I bought it in Germany because it was very handy and it was enough for a half year and it wasn’t very expensive at all. Such a plastic bag for the waste.
Andreas was used to buying plastics bags for the waste basket in Germany for a few years before he searched for them and began buying them in Sweden. He explained that he did so, as with his shaving cream, simply because he was familiar with the location where the plastic bags are sold.

Andreas and his wife also buy clothes for their children in Germany. The reason, he explained, is that shopping takes more time in Sweden because he doesn’t know where to go and in Germany he does. In addition, in Germany, quite simply there are more shops and more choice. The car gets filled with food on the way back to Sweden.

Okay, let me think again, then it is that we get to a meal affair, a Euro supermarket. We used to buy meat that you can lay on the bread, cheese. Of a type that doesn’t exist here. Sometimes you can buy cheese and that you don’t buy here. It is sort of… but we are not depending on it, we just buy it because we are in Germany. […] Yes, then, there is a chocolate. Special sort of chocolate, I did not find it here in Sweden, you can only buy in Germany. […] Chocolate. So… colour, and yes, also this is the same, that we are not depending on it. [If] we don’t have it, we don’t have it.

What is most important to note here is the habitual character of obtaining these items from the Euro supermarket. The items themselves are not necessarily important but more the fact that Andrea’s family obtains them by the mere fact that they are in Germany and there is nothing to impede them from doing so. The everydayness embedded in this material practice demonstrates, at least in part, the extent to which the transnational migrant routes experienced by Andreas and his family are uninterrupted. Or in other words, the very mention that the family does not “depend on” the items from the German supermarket reveals a sense of continuity experienced by the family in the transnational space they occupy.

**Fluent Emplacements: Familiar Objects and Habitual Practices**

As with any other knowledge acquired about migrants, how we answer the questions of *which* objects become important and *why* depends on how we construct our field in terms of theoretical perspectives and how we choose the respondents. This article focuses on the material layers of migrants’ transnational lives. The examples above have therefore been analysed through the lens of making palpable connections, directed towards the objects and practices deemed important by their owners. Several relevant issues implied in the material have not been commented on in detail, such as the family relations the people quoted are embedded in, and their reliance on social networks that help or facilitate transnational trafficking of objects.

In the wider project framework, the analytical attempt to connect the answers to *which* objects travel across borders and *why* they are set in motion resulted in four hypotheses that help in outlining a theory of objects in migrants’ transnational lives. They relate objects and material practices to the issue of material continuity and the perceived normalcy of everyday life in a transnational context; to the issue of presence in another location; to the feeling of incorporation; and to the issue of social connections and obligations (see Povranović Frykman 2012). The following remarks are direct-
ed only towards the material continuity and the perceived normalcy of lives stretched across borders.

In the examples above, objects are not transported across transnational spaces out of any kind of coercion but out of free choice and in a context of relative affluence. Indeed, people engage in trafficking objects, in part, because or when they can. The more restricted people are (primarily by the means and the costs of transportation), the more they may be forced to reflect on their choices. It is plausible that socio-economic privilege expands the range and accessibility of practical options. Yet, it is far from certain that well-off migrants bring along more objects. The reasons transnational migrants do or do not tend to establish material continuities between their multi-sited everyday settings could also be investigated in comparison to internal migrants as well as to people with double homes (see Löfgren and Bendix 2007).

What is striking from the examples above is the habitual character of the practices described. People often seem to engage with objects transnationally without a desire to be fully rational about what they are doing, sometimes even without reflecting on it. Once reflecting on what is carried across borders, both the German and the Italian doctor said some of the traffic they engage in is “strange” or “ridiculous” as it also involves trivial objects of everyday use. In the wider material gathered in this project there are numerous instances of amused laughs and characterizations of material practices as “dragging” objects from original home-setting, or that these practices are “silly”, “funny”, and “illogical”, because many of the objects can be easily obtained in Sweden (see Povrzanović Frykman 2012).

Important, but only touched upon here, is the issue of what migrants bring along when going back to places and homes of origin. Some of them have become so accustomed to utensils and food products from elsewhere that they “have to” have them along wherever they travel, just as in the introductory vignette about “having” to have a particular coffee-maker. As mainstream migration research quite often positions migrants as longing for and belonging to the homeland, researching material links in the “opposite” direction is especially relevant.

Scholars proposing that we “materialize ethnography” noted that “the multiple and sensuous qualities of material forms […] give them particular powers and effects in social life” (Geismar and Horst 2004:7). Indeed, several examples above suggest that the intimacy of a home is established via objects that have direct contact with the body. Although seemingly very different, food, coffee-makers, clothes, beds and linen, demonstrate how in order to be at home (in a new apartment, in another country) one must feel at home by relying on some familiar senses and sensations facilitated by the presence of familiar objects. If “‘home’ is a continual interplay between idea and substance” (Geismar and Horst 2004:9), our examples show that the core of this substance can be found in objects enmeshed in transnational routes, and in the material practices they animate. Their presence in respective users’ everyday lives goes without saying. As migrants may
negotiate many of their habits in new surroundings, the objects that allow for habits to go uninterrupted despite the fact that their lives are stretched between different locations appear to be especially important.

Food, both home-made and industrially produced, is of special importance for migrants as a means of connecting places. Virtually all research participants in the project have engaged in receiving, sending and transporting food across borders, in both directions, both legally and illegally. This is nothing new: the importance of food from homelands, home regions, and parental homes has been observed by many scholars of migration (see, e.g., Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport 2000, Petridou 2001). The issue, however, of bringing food from the country of immigration back to the original home has been far less researched. In the frames of the project presented here, it is of the utmost importance as it confirms the multi-relational character of transnational spaces that engage both migrants and those who stayed behind.

In line with our theoretical stance and analytical lens, food that travels transnationally is less interesting from a standpoint of its specific origin and memories it might evoke and more interesting for facilitating familiar sensations and reinforcing habits by enabling a continuity of practices in different locations. In our examples, what emerges is not an ethnic marker but rather a facilitator of familiar senses and practices, at the ever-present intersection of sociality and materiality of hominess. Eating the same food “here” as “there”, can be seen as the utmost act of embodying connection and denying the experiential segregation between distant locations.

**Conclusion: Palpable Connections and a Sense of Continuity**

In pursuing questions of how people make choices, exercise agency, and create normalcy and continuity in conditions of transnational migration, this article has pursued an interest in objects – not as generators of feelings or cultural meanings, but above all as animators of material practices that occur on a habitual basis and establish continuities in transnational social spaces. It has set out to show the importance of looking at everyday practices and the need for an ethnographic approach that reaches the individuals’ level of experience.

Analysis of the ethnographic material suggested that transnational spaces are made up of material layers, not only in terms of relevant geographical locations in different countries, but also in terms of objects used and the material practices enacted in transnational spaces. If objects are at the centre of analytical attention they can reveal how perceived continuity in migrants’ lives may be emotionally and practically contained in their materiality and why and how this is important for migrants.

The country of origin and the land of immigration are not juxtaposed in migrants’ everyday experience. “Here” and “there” are flexible and fluid categories that tend to be conflated when certain objects are used and certain material practices enacted. It is also through objects, especially those made by or inherited from significant others, that intimacy and
physical proximity with original family members is felt, re-enacted and confirmed.

“Homeness” is not the same as “homeland”; “feeling at home” is not necessarily related to a national territory. While objects may differentiate “national cultures” and signal belonging, the examples above refer to personal feelings about homemaking and thereby to the ways of being. As the approach pursued here prioritizes “home” as an empirical, experiential category, what those objects might symbolize (if displaying belonging) is less important than how they provide migrants with a sense of “being at home” in different locations. Even if some objects and practices may appear “typical” for a country or a region of origin, the ones depicted in our examples refer to more familial, local, and personal realms and cannot be conflated with larger political identities. The people quoted in this article point out that tastes, smells, and ways of doing things are important – not the representative functions of objects accompanying them along their transnational routes.

These objects by no means constitute the entire or exclusive content of our interviewees’ everyday lives; it is our analytical lens that makes them stand out as central in the discussion here. However, the sense of continuity they contribute to, and the related sense of normalcy, can explain the non-existence of nostalgia and alienation that are part and parcel of a different analytical construction, that of migrants as displaced persons. Indeed, our material suggests that enjoying the familiarity of objects and practices is not a matter of migrant nostalgia for the homeland. On the contrary, it is proof of migrants’ palpable connections to places and people in different locations.

Notes

2 Maja Povrzanović Frykman’s project “The Transnational Life of Objects: Material Practices of Migrants’ Being and Belonging” is financed 2011–13 by the Swedish Research Council (code 2010-33187-77170-219). The ethnographic material used in the article was collected in spring 2011 by Michael Humbracht, then MA student at Lund Department of European Ethnology, within the framework of a seminar series connected to the project, held by Maja Povrzanović Frykman at the Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (Spring semester 2011).

3 “Transnational social spaces can be understood as pluri-local frames of reference which structure everyday practices, social positions, biographical employment prospects, and human identities, and simultaneously exist above and beyond the social contexts of national societies” (Pries 2001: 23).
For a critique of the ethnic lens and an ethnographically grounded questioning of the importance of ethnic affiliation as a motivator of transnational practices, see Povrzanović Frykman 2012. That text, also based on the project “The Transnational Life of Objects: Material Practices of Migrants’ Being and Belonging,” discusses the material practices of international students in Southern Sweden and focuses on the narratives of four Iranians in order to raise methodological questions revolving around the importance of objects as ethnic markers.

More specifically, the project will compare the experiences of people who did and did not migrate out of free choice; people with migratory experience of different lengths; migrants of different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds; their non-migrant transnational counterparts and family members in so-called inter-ethnic marriages; and last but not least, transnational migrants vs. internal migrants who move within a single country.

“If the experience of transnationality is class-specific, the mobility practices of those who are relatively affluent and privileged are expected to differ significantly from those who are not” (Kurotani 2007: 15). Yet, sustained comparative research is needed in order to establish how exactly home-making practices and the use of objects in domestic sphere can differ in relation to migrants’ socio-economic positions.

References


Povrzanović Frykman, Maja 2012: Objects in Migrants’ Transnational Lives. When Are They “Ethnic”? Manuscript, a revised version of the paper presented at the IMISCOE Transmig (Transnational practices in migration) research group workshop in Malmö, 5–6 December 2011.


