

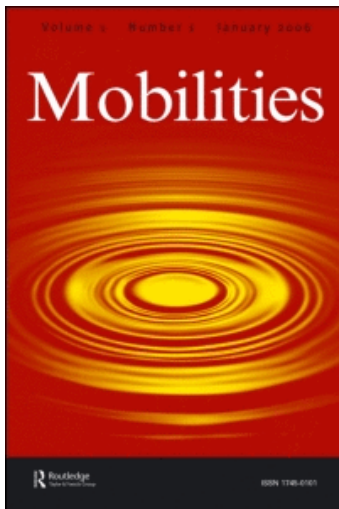
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### Materialising the Border: Spaces of Mobility and Material Culture in Migration from Post-Socialist Poland

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# Materialising the Border: Spaces of Mobility and Material Culture in Migration from Post-Socialist Poland

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**ABSTRACT** *Using post-socialist Polish migration to Britain as a case study, this article analyses the ‘furnishing’ of journey and border times and spaces by recent Polish migrants – a theme which has been neglected in most migration studies research. Four key intersections between movement and materiality, and their significance for migration, are considered: passports, car and coach journeys, suitcases, and laptops in airport lounges. Set against a backdrop of shifting mobility dynamics in Europe, these overlapping examples demonstrate the different ways in which Polish migrants have filled the spaces of international borders and performed the experience of mobility since 1989. The article finds that the physical practice of journeying and border crossing is not an empty act, suspended in space and time between two realities, but is a highly materialised and emotional undertaking, and a real, tangible space in its own right.*

**KEY WORDS:** Poland, UK, migration, borders, journeys, material culture

## Introduction

Journeys and borders are clearly pivotal times and spaces for the analysis of mobility. While border studies research has traditionally concentrated on the overarching issues of power, state sovereignty and government-controlled mobility which are embodied in borders, increasing interest is now being shown in the intersection between the political and the personal at borders, and the implications of large-scale political constructions for individual mobilities. Löfgren (1999, p. 6), for example, notes how political borders are also ‘intensely personal boundaries’, while Newman (2006, p.152) argues that ‘it is at the level of narrative, anecdote and communication that borders come to life’. As more ethnographic research is used to uncover how ordinary people experience borders (Megoran, 2006; Meinhof, 2002), qualitative border studies are forging an interesting intersection with the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p.208) developing in the social sciences.

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Who is mobile, and who is not, and how mobility and immobility are managed, ordered and experienced are becoming ever more significant questions in a simultaneously increasingly globalised yet stratified world (see McCeyman & Cunningham, 2004, p. 293; Gogia, 2006).

Some of the most interesting literature to emerge from these issues has concentrated on this personal aspect of the experience of mobility, travel and borders. While earlier work lamented the emptiness of mobility and the unrelenting sameness of mobility modes and hubs, the new focus has been to reassess these ideas of 'non-places' (Augé, 1995) and 'placelessness', and bring locality, and materiality, back into mobility (see Urry, 2003, p. 271; Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 210). Merriman (2004) especially has challenged Augé's work, demonstrating the importance of the materiality of environments of mobility by illustrating the specific local history and characteristics of the M1 motorway in Britain. If places of mobility have their own (changing) identities, then people too – being intensely aware of their physical surroundings as they travel – develop in-situ travelling identities and relationships as they go, arguably 'dwelling-in motion' (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 214).

This lively focus on locality and materiality lends itself well to the study of material culture. The material environments of mobility can be analysed, as can the objects which themselves travel, with or without human companions, as personal possessions and/or commodity chains (see Lury, 1997; Cook & Harrison, 2007). What people choose to take with them on a journey, and how they carry these things, are important aspects of the travelling experience. Object mobility also allows for the evaluation of the specificity of object values and meanings (Appadurai, 1986, p. 4), and the extent to which these change once posited in new environments. The intertwining of personal relationships, gift giving and home are also particularly important aspects of the mobility of material culture – what do people bring back with them as presents from their travels, and what do they bring to keep in their own homes?

The growing recognition of the material dimensions of mobility has added a new depth to understandings of the experience of travel. With regard to temporal matters, time spent travelling is now recognised as lived, not dead time (Hannan et al., 2006, p. 13), and the passivity necessitated by long journeys, while difficult to narrate, acknowledged as integral to travelling – waiting and stillness being as important characteristics of mobility as movement (Bissell, 2007, pp. 292, 286). As for the emotional elements of travel, the longstanding association of borders and mobility with restlessness and, in particular, trauma, is being moderated slightly as differently nuanced studies emerge. Travelling and border crossing can of course be anxious (Löfgren, 1999), but border spaces can also be fun, inviting places, as the antics of Slovenian teenage girls visiting the Austrian border as a leisure pastime demonstrates (Hipfl et al., 2002, p. 57).

Quite obviously, journeys and borders are particularly significant for the life experiences of migrants; they are the axes on which migration turns. For migrants, border spaces and journey times are heavily imbued with all the emotions of moving. They can be familiar, frightening, unsettling or exciting, heralding the promise of a new life, or reminding of the loss of an old one. However, in spite of such strong academic interest in borders and journeys, and their inherent connection to migration, it appears that, with the important exception of the dangerous attempts

to cross over from Mexico into the USA (see Alvarez, 1995; Durand & Massey, 2004) migration literature in general has overlooked these aspects of the migration experience. The actual journeys made by migrants and their experiences of border crossing have been notably absent from many of the key works on migrant experiences, and, more surprisingly, from most of the work undertaken on transnationalism – a practice reliant on travelling and journeying in different forms. Even Baldassar's (2001, pp.9, 338) work on return trips to Italy from Australia, which recognises the importance of journeying for migrant identity, includes very little about the long journeys themselves. Levitt's (2001) work on transnational links between Boston and the Dominican Republic is similarly illuminating on social and economic ties, but almost silent on the physical travelling that sustains them. More than a decade ago Brah (1996, p. 182) identified that 'at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey', but as yet, the real, tangible nature of these journeys is still relatively unexplored.

### **Polish Migration: Mobility and Materiality**

Polish migration to the UK offers an interesting case study for aspects of migrant mobility, particularly in light of the phenomenal growth in migration from Poland to the UK since 2004 when Poland joined the EU. At the end of the twentieth century the UK Polish population, at less than 100,000, was generally in decline, consisting largely of the remaining refugees and demobbed soldiers who had settled after the Second World War (see Burrell, 2006a), those who had migrated as professionals (primarily doctors and academics) and those who had 'stayed on' after visiting family on tourist visas throughout the socialist era (see Burrell, 2008b; Sword, 1996), and small movements of post-1989 newcomers – both professional and irregular migrants (see Jordan, 2002).<sup>1</sup> Between May 2004 and March 2008, however, over 500,000 new registered workers arrived from Poland (Home Office, 2008, p. 8).<sup>2</sup> Having been one of the largest minority groups in the immediate postwar pre-commonwealth migration era, Polish nationals are once again an extremely significant component of the UK's ethnic profile and are one of the fastest growing migrant populations in the country. This migration, moreover, while important with regards to UK immigration, is also hugely symbolic of changing constructions and experiences of 'east' and 'west' in Europe.

The research from which this article draws is part of a wider, and ongoing, project analysing Polish migration to the midlands region of the UK since the late 1950s, and is primarily based on 30 in-depth interviews with migrants who came to Britain during this period of time.<sup>3</sup> One of the key features of this research has been to examine how experiences of migration and transnationalism have altered in the past 50 years, and how developments such as 1989 and 2004 have impacted on the different *mobilities* (Larsen et al., 2006, p. 59; Urry, 2003) of Polish migrants, in relation to 'the west' and, more specifically, the UK (see Burrell, 2008a). The interviews have demonstrated very effectively the increased general international mobility which both of these changes have brought for many Polish citizens (notwithstanding the decreased *local* mobilities which have been one consequence of post-socialist 'transition' (Stenning, 2005)) – first with being able to leave Poland freely after 1989, and secondly, in 2004's enlargement of the EU, with being able to

move freely into the UK (initially in addition to Sweden and Ireland). At the same time, this corporeal mobility has been accompanied by enhanced imaginative, virtual and communicative mobility, with the fall of socialism closely preceding the growth of the Internet and other telecommunications connections, and more recently dramatically increased travel links.

The other main research focus has been on the material experiences of these migrants; their lives in Poland, the materiality of their migratory and transnational connections and their material encounters in the UK. Unsurprisingly, one of the clearest findings has been the stark contrast between the material worlds which the migrants inhabited first in Poland and then in Britain before 1989, with women's narratives of migrating in particular highlighting the emotional enormity of this change (Burrell, 2008b). The importance of physically transporting goods back and forth, before and after both 1989 and 2004, has been another of the most significant themes to emerge – Polish transnational connections are incredibly lively and varied, with transnational relationships embodied in the food and gifts shuttled over the border(s) and back again (see Burrell, 2008b).

With mobility and material culture as such important aspects of the research, journeys were inevitably critical to discussions about both. Some of the respondents talked easily about their first journeys to the UK especially, narrating long and intricate stories about how they first travelled. Others had to be asked directly about this aspect of their migration, almost needing reassurance that it was interesting to talk about. Once asked, however, all demonstrated the emotional weight of journeying for migration purposes. Pawel, who came to Britain in 2006 at the age of 21, dealt with his fears by sleeping for almost his entire journey:

I was sleeping from my town to Berlin I was sleeping all the way, and on the plane I was sleeping all the way, and my friend picked me up from Luton airport and I was a bit scared, confused, not sure what would happen, if I would have to go back to Poland in one month because I had run out of money, and I wouldn't find a job. During the first month it was a big unknown what would happen. But I am here still.<sup>4</sup>

Adriana spoke of her fears about flying for the first time to get here: 'It was my first time by plane when I came so I was nervous. So when we landed I was glad'.<sup>5</sup> Marta relayed her strategies for travelling by plane and how she feels when she goes back to Poland:

I am used to travelling, so it is like every other visit to an airport. My aim is to check in as smoothly and as soon as possible, because I find the ambiance of check in area stressful and uncomfortable. Usually I am trying to avoid panicking crowds. Then I pray for the plane not to be delayed. I don't let myself feel like I'm coming home until I approach the borders of my home city. Seeing the places I love triggers enormous level of excitement and happiness and makes the prospect of meeting my loved ones real and tangible.<sup>6</sup>

As these three migrants all show, journeys are not in themselves suspended times and spaces, but, because they are *so* emotionally significant, sometimes the only way to

cope with them is to try to render them such; to sleep, wait and to try to control and defer emotion until they are over. Journeying for migration is not the same as other, more casual or everyday modes of travel. Migrants' journeys have a life-changing quality absent in other journeys, and they are therefore integral to the broader experiences of migration.

With these contexts established, this article has two key aims. First, it will underline this importance of borders and journeys for migration and migrant transnationalism and demonstrate how ideas and debates about travel and borders can be related more directly to migration. Second, and most importantly, it will analyse the materiality of these journey and border spaces. By focusing on four key interlinking material 'moments' in recent Polish-UK migration – passports and visas, car and coach travel, suitcases, and laptops in airport lounges – this article will show how migrant journeys and border crossings, far from being empty, in-between states, are intensely material and *used* spaces and times. In short, it will reveal the ongoing and shifting 'furnishing' of border spaces by recent Polish migrants.

### **Political Made Personal: Passports and Visas**

This first section will consider how the changing international mobility of Polish citizens since 1989 has been manifested in personal border crossings. As already noted, the change 1989 created for Polish (and other East/Central European) international freedom of movement marked a real turning point in individual travel and emigration experiences. Prior to 1989 it was very difficult to leave Poland legally in order to travel outside the eastern bloc. Journeying to other politically aligned socialist countries was relatively free, something narrated enthusiastically by many respondents through stories of family holidays and purchasing trips to Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria for example, but movement outside of this sphere was closely controlled. For a long time most people were not allowed to keep passports at home, or instead were forced to have separate documents for state-approved work related travel and more restricted personal movement. Applying for a private passport was therefore an uncertain, protracted and highly politicised process, with no guarantee that one would be issued at the end. The generation of overseas travel visas was also similarly precarious, usually relying on invitations and job offers from the West. It *was* possible to 'go west', as the high numbers of Polish workers moving to Germany in the 1980s proved (see Iglicka, 2001), but it was not straightforward, particularly for those without German ancestry and potential *ausseidler* status. Not surprisingly, the interviews undertaken with people who left before 1989 were full of personal stories about the frustration of applying for passports, of having passport applications refused and of waiting years before having passports issued, and also of the need to secure invitations from family and friends already in Britain (see Burrell, 2006b). Those emigrating after 1989 also remembered these earlier obstacles to international mobility; Sylwia, for example, spoke about how in 1984 her teenage sister queued for three days outside the French embassy in order to get a visa to allow her to travel to Paris for a two-week student exchange.<sup>7</sup> Not being able to keep a passport at home is an important material issue. As Wang (2004, p.355) notes, passports link individual identity with state sovereignty (see also Löfgren, 1999, p.10); these policies denied individuals

possession of the most important material object of mobility they could have. For many people, *not* having a passport at home, safely hidden away in a drawer, would have been a constant tangible reminder of the socialist regime and the control it rendered over personal movement.

As passports became more easily available after 1989 their significance for mobility inevitably changed, something the interview conversations reflected. Tales of mobility obstructions being caused by the absence of passports were replaced by discussions of not having the *right sort* of passport. Having the right kind of passport within Europe is a contentious matter. As Verstraete (2003, p. 229) has noted, the contrasting levels of mobility within Europe between EU and non-EU citizens is stark, and is played out in a highly public, visible manner at border areas. While non-EU travellers wait in segregated queues and face more complicated procedures, EU members can generally pass through together reasonably easily. Duvell's (2004, p. 7) research has illustrated how this situation was, inevitably, especially difficult for the many 'undocumented' Polish migrants coming to Britain in the 1990s, but with their non-EU passports even 'legal' pre-2004 Polish migrants found that their migration journeys constantly reflected and reinforced their wider positioning within Europe. Arriving in Britain, and clutching their visibly different passports, they encountered a different border experience to EU travellers – longer queues, questions about what they were doing and how long they would be staying. Julia, who migrated in 1999, struggled with hostility at the UK border:

Because of visa problems and immigration problems I couldn't travel as much and there were times that I had to, at the border they didn't want to let me through, they were asking me very personal questions.

*Q Which border?*

Here, asking me if I was pregnant, was I coming here just to be with my boyfriend and marry him and then escape with British money. They were very rude at the border. There was a point that I was in tears on the way back, so stressed that they were not going to let me in... It is not like I came here to use British benefits or anything like that.<sup>8</sup>

As Cunningham (2004, p. 335) has noted, border crossings can be 'pivotal moments of subjugation', frustrating and humiliating experiences where travellers are vulnerable to the variable rigours of the 'rites of passage' of passport checks as they arrive (see Wang, 2004, p. 357; Salter, 2005, p. 47). For these Polish migrants, moreover, this rite of passage did not just happen on their initial arrival, but had to be re-enacted every time they visited home and returned again.

With EU accession and new labour policies this type of experience has eased for Polish migrants travelling back and forth between the UK and Poland. According to Elzbieta, 'after accessing the EU, it became even quicker and less detailed... Going by plane seemed to be even easier from the early beginning, the formality of checking your ID card, scanning baggage and getting on board'.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps ironically, Polish

entry into the Schengen Agreement in December 2007 has now arguably made Polish citizens *more* mobile, and certainly less fettered, than British travellers within Europe. The issue of where Poles can go and where they cannot, however, has remained important for the interviewed migrants. Sylwia had been living and working in Britain for five years when she was refused a visa for Canada:

I was refused a visa, was it before 2004? It was in 2004, I was refused a visa to Canada. I wanted to visit a friend in Canada, flying to Vancouver. I applied for a visa and I was refused a visa as a tourist. There is definitely this thing going on.

Paweł still sees the world as divided between places which require visas and those that do not. His imaginative mobility, based on the reality of his potential corporeal mobility, is sharply curtailed by visa regulations:

We don't need a visa to come here. We just need a visa to go to the US now basically. They want to finish with visas for Polish people for three months, a test period basically, because there are loads of immigrants in the US as well, Polish. My uncle lives in Canada, for fifteen years, he has got his own company, but it is still quite hard to get a visa to the US or Canada. But we will see what will happen.

The fact that passport stories have been superseded by visa discussions is an important indicator of how much Polish international mobility has grown (see Burrell, 2008a). As Andrijasevic (2003, p.258) has noted, journeys and border crossings are usually relayed in interview situations when there are difficulties, or when mobility is impeded; when the crossing is smooth very little is recounted. The absence of passports from post-socialist Polish migrant journey narratives, when compared with the ubiquitous presence of the passport in the interviews of earlier migrants, illustrates that since 1989 the most pressing legal mobility concerns have ceased to be about leaving Poland, but have shifted instead to entry into Western countries (see Galasińska & Kozłowska, 2007).

### **Transport and Journeys: Cars and Coaches**

With or without the right kind of passport, the interviewed migrants evidently made epic journeys across Europe in order to start and subsequently sustain their new lives in Britain. Before the advent of low-cost air routes cars and coaches were the most accessible and popular means of travelling back and forth. Since Urry's (2000, pp. 58–59) claim that automobility has been neglected and cars viewed as a neutral technology, more attention has been paid to the practice and implications of car travel for mobility, and the freedom of movement and promise of new experiences which are associated with cars (Featherstone, 2004, p. 13; Sheller, 2004, p. 224; Dant & Martin, 2001). Free from the time constraints of travel timetables, the privatised time of car travel is an important part of its appeal (Urry, 2004, p. 29). Perhaps more significantly, this privatised time also offers a personalised space; cars become almost like mobile homes on long journeys. Elements of home can be carried on board the



car – family, friends, possessions (see Dant, 2004, p. 73) – making cars important everyday dwelling-in-motion vehicles. For migration purposes, these factors are arguably all magnified. The car is no longer just an everyday mode of transport, but is the major facilitator of the creation of a new life somewhere else. Like passport checks, car journeys can also be a ‘rites of passage’ experience (see Galasińska & Kozłowska, 2007).

Travelling by car was central to Izabela’s narration of her and her husband’s migration to Britain in the early 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Her story of their migration began with an account of just ‘jumping into the car’ as soon as her husband’s work papers had been arranged, literally leaving for Britain with a packed car the next morning. They drove with their car full of books, sleeping bags, pots and pans, and what they hoped was enough food to last them the journey. Marx (2005, p. 21) has observed the varying nature of border spaces, how border changes can be sudden or gradual. As Izabela and her husband’s journey took them right across Europe, driving through Poland, Germany and Belgium, finally crossing to Britain on a passenger ferry, their personalised border space between Poland and Britain (discounting the borders along the way) was vast, stretching out gradually over land and sea for more than a thousand kilometres. This journey allowed the real distance of the migration to be felt, both in terms of physical travel, and in economic disparity between Eastern and Western Europe. Izabela’s story of their first journey, and the decision not to eat at a motorway restaurant, illustrates this perfectly:

I remember, there is a funny story, we were driving through Europe, of course having the tea and all the sandwiches with us. I remember my uncle... he gave us a box of tomatoes. So we had this box of tomatoes on the back seat of the car. So on the way to Britain we stopped and we didn’t have money, we didn’t have anything, so we didn’t go to the restaurant, we sat on the pavement, on the grass, eating these tomatoes and sandwiches, and we said ‘if we succeed we will stop in this restaurant once when we are passing it’. And it happened, it happened several years after, because of course we were better off later and we could stop in this restaurant several times, but it wasn’t always the proper time to have a stop, because we travelled to Poland by car quite often. We never stopped there, but always, always when we see this restaurant now we always mention the moment when we couldn’t afford to go in. And once three years ago we finally stopped. We went in and it turned out it was a pancake restaurant, so we ordered pancakes and they were awful. So we were just happy that we didn’t spend the money which was really short then, for these awful pancakes on the motorway in Belgium. This is the story of our motorway restaurant, we couldn’t afford it.

As Merriman (2004) has argued, and as this story confirms, motorways are not meaningless spaces. A nondescript pancake restaurant on a Belgian motorway has become an ingrained and enduring ‘moment’ in this couple’s migration experience.

As Izabela’s pancake story suggests, car narratives have important wider meanings, powerfully combining social (see Urry, 2004, p. 26) and bodily mobility. The metaphor of the car for social mobility and status has been recognised as a significant theme recounted in male life stories especially: as Löfrgen (1998, p. 121)

has observed, 'In retrospect, life can become a drive along an upwardly mobile freeway, where the buying of better or bigger cars marks a family on the move, going somewhere'. Marcin managed to merge the stories of his migration *and* ensuing economic success through the narration of his interactions with different cars over his lifetime, first in socialist Poland, then driving across Europe, and finally driving and buying new cars in Britain:

My parents' first car, do you know a car called Syrena? The nickname of the car was a washing machine because it sounded like a washing machine, and I remember when my parents first bought it, it was still the 1970s, and they were so happy with it. It just kind of shows you what kind of crude and harsh conditions you live in if a car like that can give you so much happiness and joy... I'll tell you a story about coming to Britain. The story is that we came by car ... we bought a car, it was a Volkswagen Scirocco, it was a lovely car, ten years old.... I mean on the whole I think that I did right because I am now here, I have my own house, I drive a lovely car, just been to order a new one.<sup>11</sup>

With cars associated with personal freedom, privacy and status, it is interesting to contrast these experiences with the journeys undertaken by Polish migrants travelling by coach, another pivotal transport link for migration to Britain and one which has seen an enormous growth in passenger numbers since 2004. These trips were presented very differently in the interviews; rather than being exciting and spontaneous journeys into the future, coach journeys were revealed to be stressful and uncomfortable times, crucially carrying the added burden of being much lower in social status. Sylwia was very conscious of what travelling by coach signified:

I first came on a bus from Krakow, and it wasn't that my family could not at all afford a plane ticket, there was a possibility that I would go by plane, but there were four of us going, and they were all going by bus, so it was an obvious thing to do... At that time I still felt this economic difference very much, and knowing that people would ask 'how did you come?', so I did feel some kind of inferiority and embarrassment.

Both Sylwia and Patrycja spoke about the physical demands of coach travel, of lugging big, heavy suitcases around coach stations, of spending hours and hours travelling and the bewilderment felt when faced with busy coach depots. Patrycja in particular found Victoria and Birmingham coach stations stressful and disappointing places:

The problems started in the United Kingdom when I left the Polish coach. I had very heavy luggage and I had to go to Victoria Station, not far away, it was only two minutes walking, but with heavy luggage it was terrible... And when I was at Victoria Station all the time something was happening, the coaches were coming and going, and it was very quick, we didn't have any time but to get your luggage and go... And then I took a coach to the next city. I didn't understand what the driver wanted us to do, why we had to change coach, why

are we not on time, why is everything going wrong here, where is this Birmingham, this terrible shed [Digbeth Coach Station]?<sup>12</sup>

Coach travel, critically, is a public means of journeying and ‘other people’ were conspicuously present in both Sylwia and Patrycja’s accounts of their migration. The coaches they used, in 1999 and in 2004, were full of other Poles travelling to Britain, and they were therefore in close proximity to other people’s migration hopes and experiences. Patrycja, who as a prospective postgraduate student was in a relatively privileged position, spoke of her shock at meeting two young Polish women at Victoria Coach Station who were coming to work as cleaners in a hotel and had purchased expensive perfumes on the ferry, expecting their new life in Britain to be glamorous. In her words, ‘It was very funny because I was thinking when I was talking to them, “they really think that the United Kingdom just waits for them”... They will be cleaning but they have got these really good perfumes, everything was so strange’. The differences between car and coach travel are quite dramatic. While the economic disparity between East and West is perhaps equally obvious travelling by car and coach, the social stratification of Polish migrants themselves is far more apparent in coach travel, where people’s personal migration biographies are publicly performed and observed.

### **Companions and Containers: Suitcases**

One other aspect of car travel which differs markedly from other modes of transport is the capacity for carrying goods on migration journeys. As discussed above, with a car personal possessions can be ferried to and fro freely and in significant volume. Even more than the privacy offered, the biggest advantage of using a car for migration and visits home is the ability to transport things while travelling. The overloaded car has been an important motif of Polish migration, particularly during the socialist era when returnees regularly filled their cars with as many ‘Western’ goods as possible to take to family back in Poland, risking the wrath of border guards on the way (see Burrell, 2008b). For those not travelling by car, but instead journeying by coach and now more recently by air, this ‘haulage’ role has been filled by the suitcase. The suitcase has a powerful image in migration studies, strongly associated with loss, trauma and displacement. Mertus et al.’s (1997) *The Suitcase*, for example, is a compelling collection of testimonies gathered from refugees from the former Yugoslavia. Here, the suitcase clearly signifies the panicked moments of being forced to leave home, grabbing whatever possessions could be packed quickly and would aid survival on an unknown journey. Tolia-Kelly (2006) has focused on the suitcase too, analysing one South Asian woman’s practice of keeping hidden in a cupboard a suitcase filled with things from home – a former life in East Africa. Suitcases, however, do not just represent loss; materials tucked away in suitcases in attics can hold good memories of earlier experiences, and can provide the tangible cornerstones of family history (see Löfgren, 1999, p. 23). As the central object in holiday preparation rituals – bringing down from the loft, laying out clothes to take inside – the suitcase is integral to the anticipation of trips away. With regard to migration, this works on a greater scale; suitcases embody the new life promised by moving to another country.

The collected interviews pointed to two important functions of the suitcase in journeying between Poland and Britain. First, suitcases can be viewed as companions, ensuring that the migrants are not travelling completely alone. As has been widely noted, people are always accompanied by things as they go about their lives. During the course of a journey, suitcases, as travel partners, arguably become closely tied up with the identity of the traveller; most people can pick out their own suitcases from a sea of apparently identical luggage. Even the negative references to heavy luggage throughout some of the interviews underlined the *presence* of suitcases on the trips. The protective armour of the car may be absent, but the materiality of the suitcase can provide comfort and protection in different ways. Second, the obvious feature of the suitcase is its capacity for holding objects, for containing the selected possessions of travellers and carrying them safely to their destination. As Warnier (2006, p.190) has argued, containers are particularly important items in the hierarchy of artefacts. The ability to contain, and to designate inside and outside, denotes a certain status of object. Suitcases have two containing functions; first containing things, and then transporting them across the large 'containers' which are national borders.

Sylwia's expectations of her life in Britain were personified in the contents of her suitcase on her initial journey. Travelling by coach she was able to take a suitcase weighing 40 kilos. I asked her what she packed on that first trip:

Everything. Vitamins, to keep healthy. Toothpaste, OK [laughs]. I bought clothes to make sure I don't need to buy clothes, and I remember going shopping to make sure I bought enough socks in Krakow so that I don't need to buy any socks in the UK. All kinds of clothing, all very practical, to make sure that I would be there and there would be no problem any more. I understood I would be buying my food in the UK, but things like cosmetics, those vitamins I was carrying with me, some basic medicines as well, as if paracetamol wasn't available here, these kinds of things. I had an awful suitcase... For some reason I remember the toothpaste because somebody laughed at me when they found out that I had bought toothpaste from Poland. I had a few tubes, so that I could keep going for a couple of months at least, with the toothpaste. Shower gel, 'why do you bring such things?'. That was again partly a reflection of how little I knew about what it was like. I had never been to the UK before, and I had just heard all these myths about how expensive it is... I had this understanding that there are these very basic items which will be extremely expensive here, so I had better bring them from home to avoid spending the money on them.

Far from anticipating glamour like the women at the coach station, she was trying to prepare as effectively as she could for coping in an expensive, potentially risky, country. Elzbieta spoke of a similar strategy, but also packed important things to help make her new life as homely as possible: 'stuff I liked and felt bad not having near me. Some books and CDs, my favourite pot plant, a tiny radio with an alarm clock I liked to have by my bed, some pictures, most-liked pen and pencil'.

Perhaps the most significant purpose of these suitcases is their role in carrying goods and gifts to and fro long after the first migration journey. In varying detail, all

of the respondents spoke about the things they regularly take back to Poland on visits home, and what they bring back with them to Britain afterwards. As already noted, carrying goods to Poland has a long precedent. Gift giving has always serviced the different transnational relationships of the migrants (Miller, 1998), but during the socialist era it was also played out against an obvious backdrop of economic inequality (Burrell, 2008b). Transnational personal gift 'exchange' was, to some degree, a one-way process and performed as a type of remittance. Rather than transferring money, goods which had a much higher economic, and arguably cultural, value in Poland than in Britain were posted and transported instead. Post-1989, partly in response to the uneven economic development of transition, an element of this gift-as-remittance practice has survived. Some of the migrants who have moved to Britain more recently were keenly aware of the economic disparity within their transnational friendship and family groups. Alina, for example, explained how since migrating in 1998 she always takes clothes (passed on from friends or bought in second-hand clothes shops) back to Poland with her when she visits, carrying few of her own things to leave as much room as possible for these gifts. In her words, 'Money is more difficult to give than things that I collect for people'.<sup>13</sup>

This economically driven spirit of gift giving has also continued, although in a moderated form, into the twenty-first century. Friends and family in Poland are now treated to a wide array of products and brands from Britain, many of which are available in Poland but are much less accessible and affordable. Quintessentially 'English' goods especially seem to have developed a certain cachet; personal relationships are being increasingly nurtured with British-bought and -branded goods. Marta recounted the sorts of goods she regularly takes back to Poland:

Mostly clothes, cheaper, one season in advance as far as fashion trends considered and of better quality than Polish. They are mostly new, but I bought some from charity shops as well. My best friend has a little boy now and my boyfriend's brother has two toddlers so we always buy clothes and Early Learning Centre toys, very expensive in Poland, for them. Small electronic devices like MP3 players or Internet cameras, to Skype with vision with our families, again are cheaper here. Food, Indian cuisine is not very well known in Poland so I am trying to introduce it to my friends and I take some spices and ready dishes. We take English bacon, Stilton, mincemeat, Thorntons chocolates, ale, marmite, once, never been asked to bring more, to prove that English food being tasteless is a myth and a stereotype. English books and magazines for those who are learning or are interested and enjoy the English language. My Mum and Aunties are fans of M&S beauty products so I always try to find something nice and unique for them. Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver, not to mention Gillian McKeith and Trinny and Susannah programmes are being broadcast in Poland right now, so any gadgets from their range of accessories, not available in Poland, are always warmly welcomed.

Through the Polish migrants settled in Britain, friends and family in Poland are becoming increasingly familiar with the material aspects of 'British' culture. Sylwia's

friends and acquaintances in Poland are often presented with Whittard's tea, and her family are particularly enthusiastic consumers of Marks and Spencer products:<sup>14</sup>

My mum is a big fan of Marks and Spencer's... I might get a list of something to buy, so I am asked to buy for example denim trousers for my father from Marks and Spencer's, or a jumper, so that's always a good gift. The kind of things I take with me, I buy tea, I usually go to Whittard's and just buy tea for everybody, English tea. For family there will be Marks and Spencer's jumpers, cardigans... There is something special my family feel about Marks and Spencer, it is lovely, so that is always the place I go for Christmas gifts. Every dad needs to get a Marks and Spencer jumper!

As both these testimonies demonstrate, the economic and practical elements of these gift rituals are always counterbalanced by the emotional transactions they embody (see Miller, 1998; McKay, 2007). An important aspect of Sylwia's emotional engagement with her family is fulfilled through the time she spends looking for suitable presents before she goes, then carrying them with her in person to Poland. A simple jumper is transformed by the love felt when choosing, wrapping and carrying it (see Carrier, 2006, p. 380).

The selection of 'English' products also suggests something interesting about the identities of these migrants in relation to their families in Poland. As Carrier (2006, p. 376) notes, 'in gift systems the object given uniquely carries the identity of the giver, the recipient and their relationship, which can be summarized as the spirit of the gift'. An important part of the relationships sustained with those back home now orientates around the fact that *they are in Britain* – albeit a Britain which, partly because they are settled within England, is conflated to some extent with Englishness and English things. The migrants mark themselves out as the carrier of different goods, exposed to a different material life abroad, and, in return, are marked out at home as the person who is 'away'. This embracing of English products by the migrants themselves – their *choice* of gifts to take back – is therefore perhaps more important than the response the goods are met with in Poland. Taking things from their British environment to Poland might demonstrate economic success, but it also asserts how comfortable they have become in their new lives, and the extent to which being away has influenced who they are. Their material lives and decisions ensure that in Poland they are associated with Britain.

Conversely, discussions about what is brought back from Poland suggest that the same practice happens in reverse. Suitcases on the return leg to Britain are filled with things from home, overtly Polish things, but also presents from friends and family and seemingly innocuous mementos of life there. This is what Sylwia brings back (my emphasis added):

Jewellery, these kind of things [points to bracelet], little things like that. I have a shop in Krakow which I like a lot. And it's run by two women who just make it themselves, and I am always fascinated to see them work and do these things, and I partly do it because I really want them to succeed, so I always make the point of buying something little, either for myself or as a gift. *And also because it is kind of a nice Polish thing to carry with me.* Also I bring Polish things which

I get from others as a gift when I am there, so that would be things like this scarf is from Poland which I got from my sister as a birthday gift this time around. So I will have different Polish things. Shoes, I buy shoes in Poland, every time I go. Not every time. Yes every time [laughing]. My mum buys them for me.

However embedded her life is in Britain, it would not be complete without these things linking her back to the people and places she loves. She can maintain a Polish aspect of her being through wearing the clothes and jewellery she brings back. The Polishness of these things may be imperceptible to other people, but for her they are a constant reminder of home. Elzbieta, similarly, always brings back several video cassettes of programmes taped for her by her mother, so that she can watch her favourite Polish shows in Britain. Reverse gift-giving also underlines the importance of Polish things for the identities of the migrants while in Britain. Many of the people interviewed spoke of how they consciously bring back *Polish* gifts for their friends in Britain. When they give these presents, then, in a British context, they emphasise their Polish backgrounds. While Sylwia brings famous Krakow chocolate back for her friends, Alina stocks up on cards and amber (again, my emphasis added):

I sometimes bring things, greetings cards to give to English people *because it is something different and it has got the connection with me...* I always bring amber, some amber earrings to keep in the house if there is a birthday for something I can give... Sweets, some of my friends love Polish sweets.

Food is probably the most significant type of produce brought back from Poland in suitcases, for gift giving but primarily for personal consumption. The emotional significance of food in family relationships has been widely documented; Petridou (2001, pp. 90–91), for example, has observed the central role of food in mother/child relationships between Greek women and their overseas student offspring. Greek students come back to Britain loaded down with home cooking and key local products such as meat and cheese. Marta relayed a similar situation:

My mum is a great cook, worshipping Silesian cuisine and she always prepares us a lot of local specialities. So my luggage is full of home made food, I should say meat dishes and sausage.

In a kind of reverse provisioning exercise (Miller, 1998), before leaving Poland to come back to Britain Alina always ensures she visits a supermarket to stock up on key Polish branded food products for her grandmother, who has recently come to live with her in Britain and misses certain Polish foods. Even though there has now been a proliferation of shops selling Polish goods in the UK (see Rabikowska & Burrell, forthcoming), not everything is available, and the effort expended transporting food back from Poland is reflective of their close relationship.

Bringing things back is incredibly important to the interviewed migrants; their lives in Britain are furnished to a great extent by different products and objects they carry with them on their return, and sustained by the varying emotional symbolisms attached to them. Several of the interviewees spoke at great length and with real

enthusiasm about what they carry to and fro. This practice, however, is becoming increasingly difficult to uphold. Some of the low-cost air carriers which have facilitated so much of the new migration now have such restrictive baggage weight restrictions that goods can no longer be brought backwards and forwards so freely. To meet the Ryanair weight rule of 15 kilos, for example, great care has to be taken selecting what to carry and how and where to pack it. It is almost a new ritual now for returning Polish migrants to be asked to repack their suitcases on check-in, because they have exceeded the weight limit. The respondents all spoke about this problem. According to Marta:

There is never enough space for books and magazines. I brought six kilos of my photo albums last time I went to Poland. Luggage restriction is always an issue. Since low cost airlines have introduced 15 kilos main luggage limit we pack more carefully and when buying gifts and presents always going for lighter option.

In Sylwia's words, 'I tend to fly with Ryanair and right now luggage restrictions are so terrible'. Elzbieta claimed 'I hate baggage restrictions on planes... the 15 kilos on Ryanair now is just ridiculous', while Pawel declared that 'I just buy some cigarettes for my friends, that's it. Some Polish food. Because you can just have 15 kilos for your luggage I can't take too much'.

Much more could be said about these objects which are ferried between Britain and Poland, and their changing meanings and contexts as they move (see Lury, 1997, p. 79). They vary greatly in monetary value and differ in purpose – personal enjoyment, home decoration, or to give to other people. In moving, however, what these objects have in common is their ability to strengthen, and to some extent shape, the transnational bonds of the migrants. The suitcase has a special role in this process; it brings these two different environments together – British in Poland/ Polish in Britain. Filling the suitcases and travelling with them bridges the gap between the migrants' two lives, and creates a time and space when both lives are effortlessly intermingled. As the interviews have shown, moreover, suitcases facilitate and contain the emotional work of migration and transnationalism.

### **Performances at the Airport: Laptops**

This last section will focus on one final aspect of the material spaces of journeys and border crossings, but one which has already been touched upon – the airport environment. Airports have been the focus for many of the more recent assertions about the materiality of travel spaces, and there is a growing consensus that 'airports do in fact possess a specific contingent materiality and considerable social complexity' (Hannan et al., 2006, p. 6) and that as places of transit they 'are often places of trauma, leave taking, news gathering. They are the very opposite of the "non-place" used by Marc Augé to evoke a deracinated, restless world' (Bender, 2006, p. 310). There are two points to make about airports with regard to post-2004 Polish migration specifically. First, heeding Merriman's (2004, p. 153) claim that the changing histories and geographies of travel sites are overlooked, it is interesting to note the phenomenal growth in passenger travel experienced at Łódź airport,



somewhere I flew to recently from East Midlands airport in the UK. Since Ryanair started routes from Łódź to the UK and Ireland, tiny Łódź airport has changed in function dramatically. While in 2004 the airport handled only 6,226 passengers for the whole year, in 2006 this figure had risen to 206,511 passengers, an increase of 3,217%.<sup>15</sup> Having only started routing international flights in 1996, Łódź airport is now a hub of low-cost flights, sending planes full of Polish migrants to Dublin, Shannon, Stansted and East Midlands.<sup>16</sup> Łódź, by virtue of its airport, is now firmly on the international map in a way it was not before, opening up new opportunities for travel and migration for the surrounding population.

With this enhanced mobility, Łódź airport, like all the other international airports in Poland, has been transformed much more intensely into a site of the performances of travel (see Mitchell, 2006). Some of these performances are those controlled by the national authorities, with their Foucauldian surveillance systems and ability to harness the power of the state to compel obedience (see Salter, 2005, p. 42). But not all of the performances are vertically structured and linked to the hierarchy of state-citizen power. As an important gateway for migration, Łódź has become a new location for family goodbyes and reunions, with the airport full of people hovering around the arrivals gate with expectant faces, waiting to greet returning sons and daughters. Among those waiting at the departures end, the pain of separation involved with migration is played out for all to see on a daily basis. As Löfgren (1999, p. 20) notes, airports are public spaces, with people's private lives jostling along side by side in close proximity.

Some of the most interesting performances are those carried out within the migratory cohorts themselves. With flights full of people travelling in very similar circumstances, these airports and aeroplanes are important social sites in the migration experience. Writing about co-surveillance among backpackers, Germann Molz (2006, p. 378) asks 'who is watching whom?' This is a pertinent question; the interviews demonstrated that many migrants spend more time observing each other than worrying about airport security controls or surveillance cameras. As with the coach station example before, airport lounges, and the objects used within them, have become spaces where the social differences of the Polish migrants are displayed. With the companionable suitcases checked in and en route to the aircraft holds, hand luggage and clothing take on enhanced significance, sending out signs to the other travellers around. Within this scenario, the use of laptops by young Polish men while waiting to board has become an important performance, and a topic of discussion for those observing them. Marta recounted her views on this at length:

I would call it prestige syndrome, wearing the most expensive piece of clothing, new shoes, Polish young men always wear crisp white sneakers. Ladies always with a fresh hair cut, wearing full make-up, even in a middle of the night, brand new acrylic nail extensions, fresh fake tan and glitzy jewellery. It has nothing to do with feeling comfortable during the journey, it is rather like red carpet alert situation. Showing off with technological gadgets like laptops, the best selling latest models of mobiles which haven't been released in Poland yet. iPods. Laptops are the best example. As they are still quite expensive in Poland, it is the easiest way to show how your financial status has risen since you left Poland... My boyfriend is working on a building site with 15 other Pole guys in

Nottingham now and some of them are going to Poland during the summer, and laptops are on their list of things to buy even though they have desktop computers at home in Poland. They won't use the laptops while in Poland, they will show them only. They will carry them when visiting relatives, friends or going to the pub, for demonstration purposes only. The most hilarious situation I saw was this April when I was waiting for my brother at East Midlands airport. A plane was delayed, I was sitting next to a young lad for over two hours, I noticed that he was keeping the laptop closed for all the time. The moment the gates of the arrival terminal had opened, he switched the laptop on. He and a person who arrived were going back to Derby by the same bus we were. He had the laptop on his lap all the time, switched off.

These travel performances once again reflect some of the economic pressure of migration and transnationalism; the need to be seen to be successful and to fulfil the expectations of those waiting at home and those around you, and the continuing economic gap between Poland and Britain. This example also confirms other observations made about the disparaging ways Polish migrants talk about each other, what Garaphic (2007) has termed a 'discursive hostility'. Polish migrants, rather than strive for some kind of ethnic solidarity, instead consistently depict other Polish migrants as untrustworthy, loutish and embarrassing. Airports and aeroplanes are just one more forum where these behaviours are noted and judged. According to Rafał:

I think the best example of this was just when I boarded a plane to England. There was a bunch of guys, already drunk, boasting about some clothes they had stolen from a shop, and generally being loud and vulgar. Just after we took off they opened more bottles of beer and it continued for most of the flight. Sad, but you can see many Poles like that coming here.<sup>17</sup>

Airports and aeroplanes are the latest manifestations of the migration journeys made from Poland to Britain. These enclosed, highly controlled spaces, have witnessed most of the traditional material aspects of Polish migration, and while their new central role in Polish migration marks the enhanced mobility of Poles within Europe, these sites are also host to the age-old sentiments and social mechanisms of migration – hope, excitement, anxiety and social, rather than governmental, control.

## **Conclusion**

For a long time 'migrancy' was depicted as a difficult state to be in. Chambers (1994, p. 5) once described it as 'always in transit, the promise of homecoming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility'. But this article has shown that this is exactly what migrants do – they do 'domesticate the detour'. Quite successfully, and in many different ways, they furnish the time-space available to them at borders and on journeys. Home and away may still be differentiated in the lives of migrants, but the spaces between them are not simply in-between spaces, suspended between two realities. The *materiality* of journeys and borders transforms abstract transit spaces into tangible and identifiable transit *places* – places which are

in themselves 'real' points, experienced as intensely as other points in the migration journey.

This article has illustrated the diversity of this furnishing, and how the material experiences and theatres of migration have changed over time. Despite large-scale short- and long-term emigration during the 1980s (see Iglicka, 2001), it is possible to argue that immobility, rather than mobility, characterised Polish migration before 1989. The greatest hurdles to migration were state implemented; while the West especially was close in terms of imaginative mobility, the physical routes out of Poland were curtailed, reliant on various strategies for their embodiment. One constant, however, has been the material aspect of the entitlement to migrate. Once the absence of the passport, now the absence of the visa, and until recently the right sort of passport, the absences of legal travel documents have had a strong presence in the mental mobilities of the migrants.

With the means, and right, to leave secured, the journeys taken across Europe have been important aspects of the lives of the migrants, and certainly significant in their telling of them. Initial travels have been recounted in depth, but so too have the subsequent journeys made back and forth. Not only has movement remained central to the experience of migration, but it has been narrated as something familiar and firmly embedded in ordinary life. Journey times and border spaces have been presented as a continuation of life, rather than a break from it, and have, critically, helped the migrants come to terms with *being* migrants. Most importantly, the significance of the materiality of travelling for migration has been made clear, both in terms of the material environments of travel, public and private, and the real and symbolic importance of the objects accompanying migration; the interviews have demonstrated the extent to which material culture has been pivotal in both framing and reflecting the experience of migration. Car journeys, for example, with their specific spatial and material dynamics, have enabled the physical and economic distance between Poland and Britain to be understood and *felt*. The peculiarities of the spaces of coach and air travel have allowed the migrants to witness other Poles also migrating, making it easier for them to share, observe, and sometimes judge, the actions of other migrants, and compare them with their own, putting their experiences in a wider context. The highly prized and fiercely protected ability to transport goods between the two countries has also facilitated the maintenance of close transnational relationships. Travelling suitcases full of gifts and apparently mundane products are just as important as emails, telephone calls and Skype for keeping the migrants feeling connected to Poland.

It is clear, then, that rather than being a means to an end, the journeys migrants make *are* their migration projects. All of the tensions and emotions of migration are there embedded in the materiality of travelling; not at either end of the migration experience, but there at the heart of it.

## Notes

1. The considerable emigration that did take place out of Poland during the post-1989 period was largely directed towards other Western and Southern European countries and again tended to be short-term and/or undocumented (see Iglicka, 2001; Triandafyllidou, 2006).

2. These figures, counting only registered workers, are generally assumed to be conservative, possibly underestimating true numbers considerably.
3. For this research slightly more female respondents have been interviewed than male, but the interviewees' experiences cover a wide range of circumstances – for example, time of migration, age on migration, occupation and marital status. Just over half of these interviews have been carried out with people who left Poland after 1989, two-thirds of whom have come after 2004. I have kept in touch with several of the respondents via email since undertaking the interviews. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
4. Interview with Pawel (9 March 2007), who migrated in 2006, aged 21.
5. Interview with Adriana, (24 November 2005) who migrated in 2005, aged 31.
6. Interview with Marta (10 December 2005, follow up email correspondence June and July 2007) who migrated in 2005, aged 29.
7. Interview with Sylwia (15 May 2007) who migrated in 1999, aged 23.
8. Interview with Julia (5 May 2005) who migrated in 1999, aged 19.
9. Interview with Elzbieta (5 May 2006, follow up email correspondence November 2006, July 2007), migrated to Britain in 2006, aged 32, having previously spent several years working in Holland.
10. Interview with Izabela (3 October 2005) who migrated in 1992, aged 28.
11. Interview with Marcin (9 February 2006) who migrated in 1991, aged 27.
12. Interview with Patrycja (20 October 2005) who migrated in 2005, aged 26.
13. Interview with Alina (4 May 2005, follow up email correspondence February 2007), who migrated in 1998, aged 20.
14. Of course, Marks and Spencer was originally co-founded by Jewish immigrant Michael Marks.
15. See the Civil Aviation Office of the Republic of Poland (Urząd Lotnictwa Cywilnego) 2006. Available at [www.ulc.gov.pl/download/pdf/stat2006.pdf](http://www.ulc.gov.pl/download/pdf/stat2006.pdf) (accessed on 13 July 2007). Most Polish airports have seen a dramatic rise in passenger numbers, but the Łódź example is one of the most striking.
16. See Łódź Airport official website. Available at [www.airport.lodz.pl/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=48&Itemid=125&lang=en\\_EN](http://www.airport.lodz.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=48&Itemid=125&lang=en_EN) (accessed 13 July 2007).
17. Interview with Rafał (19 November 2005), who migrated in 2005, aged 24.

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