

HOMInG Interview

with Peter J. Braeunlein

(University of Goettingen)

Conducted by Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia

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Peter J. Bräunlein holds an extracurricular professorship in the study of religion from the University of Bremen, and a Masters and a Doctoral degree in cultural anthropology from the University of Freiburg. He worked at the Germanic National Museum in Nürnberg, conducted extensive fieldwork on indigenous cosmologies and Catholicism in the Philippines, and did research on material religion in museums. He has taught at various universities in Germany (Marburg, Bremen, Freiburg, Heidelberg, Munich, Leipzig) and is currently a senior researcher in the project *The Materiality of (Forced) Migration* in Goettingen.

Areas of Interest and Research Focus: Southeast Asia, Europe; material religion; migration; museology; film and media studies; ghosts, spirits and the uncertainties of modernity.

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I want to start by asking you, who is Peter J. Braeunlein?

My scholarly expertise lies in socio-cultural anthropology, the study of religion and museum studies. I taught and researched in these three fields. Since October 2019 I am engaged in the research project *On the Materiality of (forced) Migration* at the Goettingen University (Germany).

How did you start to be interested in the study of the materiality of migration and emotion?

My interest in the materiality of culture and religion in general was stimulated by my work in museums. In the early 1990s I worked at the Germanic National Museum and later I was curator of the Museum of Religions at the University of Marburg and also taught the subject religious studies. Obviously, research and teaching were closely linked to things. At the same time, the Material Turn took root in the social sciences and was discussed more intensively. Daniel Miller, Bruno Latour and Hartmut Böhme, among others, provided thought-provoking impulses to rethink culture, society and religion. In collaboration with my partner for life and work, Andrea Lauser, the idea was born to implement the inspiration of the Material Turn for migration research. Andrea is working far more than me in this field and so the research project *On the materiality of (forced) migration* was launched. Its focus is on the material basis of human existence under the precarious conditions of migration. (Forced) Migration movements are always framed by the materiality of borders, passports, tents, camp infrastructures, boats, and not least cell phones. Bureaucracies decide human fate through paperwork and paperwork can potentially both create and destroy identities.

The current 'affective turn' has also affected migration research for a few years now. In this context it is interesting to investigate the influence of mobility on emotional cultures that are internalized by the individual. For example, it affects things like shame, honor, pride, guilt, and familial obligations, which structure inter-subjective relationships and modes of reciprocity within transnational social fields, as Amanda Wise & Selvaraj Velayutham put it in their paper on 'Transnational Affect and Emotion in Migration research' (2017).

The idea to combine materiality and emotions is obvious. Our relationship to things is sometimes highly emotional. Anyone who despairs over the breakdown of his or her laptop knows this. And everybody knows the sadness about the loss of a familiar object (be it a smartphone, a piece of jewellery or clothing). Interestingly, however, this connection between emotion and things has hardly been empirically researched, especially with regard to forced migration, which is characterized in a very special way by the experience of material loss. The feeling of loss is of course only one emotion that can be associated with things. Joy over an unexpected gift, envy of the things of others or the hopeful aspiration to acquire new things are further possible reactions.

In your EASA 2020 paper 'On the Materiality of Migration and Emotion' you made the argument that human mobility often leads to intense emotional and transformative experiences. Could you tell us what are the conceptual and empirical basis for this argument?

The statement that human mobility often leads to intense emotional and transformative experiences is certainly too general. One must be more precise here and ask about the forms of mobility. In a pilgrimage, for example, intense emotional and transformative experiences are precisely desired and aspired to. For a German exchange student in the USA, transformative experiences may be desired, but do not necessarily have to occur. For a manager who runs a transnational company and travels between Asia, Africa and Latin America 250 days a year, emotional and transformative experiences are less desirable and are avoided if possible. The statement in my paper referred to forms of forced mobility. In this context it quickly becomes clear that the reasons for flight and displacement are linked to dramatic and deeply emotional experiences. Talks with refugees show this abundantly clear. These are empirically seen, the basis of the above assertion. Conceptually, the psychological term trauma becomes relevant here as a lasting emotional shock in its multiple meanings. The term is ambiguous. It can refer to the triggering event, but also to symptoms and inner suffering. Traumatized people have intense and emotional experiences, which sometimes cannot be put into words or are subject to a communication taboo as psychological and psychiatric research on forced migration and trauma shows. However, studies on the non-traumatic processing of formative experiences such as flight and displacement are missing. The term trauma is used in an inflationary way and sometimes loses its explanatory power. The attribution that all asylum seekers are traumatized is now almost a stereotype. Future research should make clearer distinctions here.

I must also stress that formative experiences of forced mobility are of course not limited to trauma. The challenges of finding one's way around in a foreign country are

associated with transformations in self-image, value systems and action orientation. Our research on the materiality of migration makes this clear.

In the same paper, you are making the point that in the interaction between migration, material culture, and emotions, objects are "moving" in a double sense. What are these two senses?

When I say that things are moving in two ways, I am referring to Paul Basu and Simon Coleman (Introduction: Migrant Worlds, *Material Cultures, Mobilities* 3(3), 2008: 317), who stated that the interactions of subjects and objects are “often both moving, in the sense that they stir the emotions, and, indeed, moving, insofar as they entail the movement of both people and things, subjects and objects.” Both authors are among the first to bring together migration studies and material cultural studies, pointing rather casually to the emotionality that things can contain or trigger. To make it clearer: a moving object in the above sense would be, for example, a photograph that a refugee has carried with him/her all the way, showing the family left behind. Or prayer beads, which served as support and comfort in moments of greatest misery. We collected lots of such moving objects and the related stories on our research website [<https://materialitaet-migration.de/en/>]

What is the connection, if any, between material artefacts, memory, and ideas of home and belonging?

In western societies there is undoubtedly a very close connection here. This is related to the development of the bourgeoisie since the 19th century and the associated concept of self and family. A bourgeois home includes objects of remembrance that make one's own family genealogy visible as well as the becoming of an individual's own biography and education in the form of books, photographs, wall decoration, inherited kitchenware, and furniture. The bourgeoisie has created a special culture of remembrance, which is reflected in the domestic culture. Bourgeois identity draws on individuality and individuality requires a unique personal history. Private (hi)stories are written and stored in artefacts. Personal identity and artefacts can therefore sometimes even show fetish-like relationships. Bourgeois identity is reflected in the furnishing of private rooms. Moreover, privacy is a high good of the bourgeois self-image and private spaces are protected. The British motto ‘my home is my castle’, the German ‘Gemütlichkeit’ (a sense of belonging, feeling of warmth and friendliness) or the Danish national stereotype of ‘hygge’ (cosiness, solace, safety, personal wholeness, intimacy) reflect the Western bourgeois ideal types of home and belonging. Home and belonging are atmospherically produced and this requires things. Home in this sense is not conceivable as an empty space, but the company of people and things.

When we conducted field research with swidden horticulturalists on a Philippine island in the 1980s, we discovered a completely different concept of home and belonging. The culture of the Alangan-Mangyan, very mobile in fact, is materially very scarce. The families live in small stilt huts, made of wood, bamboo, tree bark and dried grass. Personal possessions are limited to bush-knives, betelnut containers, and the special

female clothing of the rattan braided “skirt”. However, all these artefacts are not unique, but can be quickly replaced if lost. During the annually recurring typhoon season, the huts are often destroyed or at least severely damaged. By home, the Mangyan understand something entirely different from the Western concept described above. Home is their own kinship group, the physical closeness to each other in the hut, the babies' babbling, the taste of sweet potatoes, the smell of smoke from the hearth fire, the sound of lullabies.

In the case of the Mangyan, the relationship between belonging and home, artefact and personal memory is almost non-existent, and the above mentioned phrase ‘my home is my castle’ is completely untranslatable into this culture. Mangyan home and belonging are socially experienced throughout. Commensality and affective moments of physical sensation are very important. The materiality of the body and its sensory capacities play a major role here (some field impressions: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/138806.html>).

My experiences of field research point to the danger of subtly universalizing our (Western) concept of home and belonging. The virtues of ethnography help to contextualize the connection between home, artefact and memory on a case-specific basis.

In your presentation, you brought the example of Amin's home. Could you please introduce this example to our readers and explain its conceptual relevance for theorizing the interplay between mobility and material culture?

Our colleague Friedemann Yi-Neumann met Amin at the Friedland transit camp. There Amin told him the story of his house which was destroyed during an air raid. He comes from a well-to-do family in Aleppo and has built and furnished his house with great effort.

That very day, Friedemann recounts the memorable event, “Amin had decided to go to work. His parents were sitting in the yard and Waad was coming down the stairs of the house when she suddenly heard the roar of an approaching plane. Intuitively, she returned to the yard in order to warn her in-laws. The aircraft advanced menacingly, the sound of its engine becoming louder and louder. Only a few moments later, the heavy detonation of a barrel bomb wrecked not only an entire wing of their house but also large parts of their street. If they had been in the part of the building where they usually reside, no one would have survived; that part of the building did not exist anymore. Waad, Bashir, and Sabirah were buried under debris, paralyzed and numb, when their neighbours pulled them through a crack in a collapsed concrete slab [...]. The three cannot remember the names of the people who saved them, but Bashir described the actual moment of their salvation as like being reborn [...]. They were displaced in Aleppo, then Amin was arrested, and his father was blackmailed by the militias. It was obvious that they had to flee Syria since there was no safe place left and most of their belongings had been reduced to rubble. After the family had managed to flee to Turkey, an uncle sent them videos of their former home on the outskirts of Aleppo – a home that had been turned into wreckage, a home that had lost all of the features and qualities that

had once been so appreciated.” (<https://materialitaet-migration.de/en/objekte/amins-haus/>)

Amin got to know our research project in Friedland. There we work together with the Migration Museum and are interested in receiving from our interlocutors not only object stories, but also objects themselves. Amin saw an opportunity to pay off some of the debt of gratitude to his dear friend Osama al Hamdan who had already died in 2015. The photo of his friend together with a photograph of Aleppo was given to the museum. He photographed the presentation of these pictures in the museum and sent these photos to his friend's son.

For us, a museum is a kind of archive, mostly in a more didactic and instrumental sense. It preserves cultural assets to protect them from being forgotten. For Amin, this museum was a place he used for a ritual of remembrance and gratitude. The pain of loss is mixed up with the obligation to a friend. The melancholic memory, perhaps also pride in his destroyed hometown of Aleppo, is also palpable.

I don't see in Amin's story any particular input for theoretical work on the interplay between mobility and material culture. But it illustrates the social and emotional significance of memory and memory rituals.

Does the materiality of Amin's destroyed house tell us anything about home?

Amin describes his home as a place of family life, a social hub and a personal project that filled him with pride and showed him to be a good family man. Amin's personality is materialized there. Sociality and materiality merge here. The destruction of this home, however, does not necessarily mean that Amin's identity has been destroyed, especially since the other family members miraculously survived. Despite the catastrophe, it can be assumed that Amin will build up a new existence, a different one than in Aleppo, but an equally honourable and humane one. However, when this form of dispossession occurs more frequently in the course of a lifetime, it has truly dramatic consequences and deeply damages personal and social existence. My colleague Friedemann Yi-Neumann tries to capture this circumstance theoretically in his contribution on 'amassed dispossessions' (<https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easa2020/paper/53787>).

Is there any partnership between your ongoing project 'The Materiality of Forced Migration and the Friedland Museum of Migration'?

From its very beginning of our research project the Friedland Museum was partner together with the exhibition team 'Die Exponauten'. Next year the first results of the research project are to be made public in an exhibition.

Finally, what opportunities and dilemmas do you see in researching the role of objects and emotions in the context of forced migration?

To get into conversation with people about objects is methodically a very productive undertaking. And this approach also allows you to discover many different facets of the

migratory experience. The many different objects in our virtual museum reflect the many facets. Not every story is connected with emotions and often people avoid talking about such moving objects at all. This is only too understandable. Here our researchers quickly develop a feeling for the limits of what can be said or of what can be asked. On the other hand, there are also moments when such conversations about objects turn into a therapy session. Tears flow and talking about terrible experiences can have a liberating effect. Sometimes our professional limits are reached here. Anthropologists are not trained as therapists. And sometimes anthropologists are overwhelmed by their own feelings after such meetings. How do you deal with this? Here it can indeed be very useful to have field research accompanied by professional supervision.

Thanks Peter for sharing your thoughts.