

## **Moving On with Things from Elsewhere.**

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### **Summary**

When the luggage is limited, the road is long, you might not even know where you are going, or for how long. What do you bring? What importance does that object have to your further journey? Things from “elsewhere” are personal objects brought from one place to another. They are artifacts that creates an emotional and material connection across borders: Between here, there, and elsewhere. One part of the exhibition *Moving On – Voices of Children in Migration* is created around the objects children have brought from Ukraine when seeking shelter in Sweden from the war. *Transnational objects*, or things from “elsewhere”, teach us about the emotional importance of things, and how they can blur out perceived differences between people because of the recognizable, common, and practical use of things in everyday life.

### **The Things We Bring Along**

Maja Povrzanović Frykman is an ethnologist who dedicates her research to materiality and migration, this means studying the things or artifacts we use in everyday life, and what that use does for people with experience of migration. She means that the objects create a palpable, or touchable connection between different locations<sup>1</sup>. For people in migration, many find themselves in social spaces that reach across borders, and the things they bring along can come to represent the individual experience and everyday dynamics of sense-making in a cross-border context. One aspect when it comes to objects and cross-border connections that is of interest in this context is how the use of these things differs or not in pre-migratory and post-migratory and ongoing migration processes<sup>2</sup>. When looking at these objects, we do not seek to highlight objects as identity markers, it is rather a way to look at the objects as bridges between people and places. Giving attention to the things of everyday use, is also a way to acknowledge this bridge as something common, creating insights into the

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<sup>1</sup> Maja Povrzanović Frykman and Michael Humbracht (2013) Making Palpable Connections Objects in Migrants' Transnational Lives. p.48

<sup>2</sup> Maja Povrzanović Frykman (2019) Transnational Dwelling and Objects of Connection. p 39

recognizable concerns and experiences of material practices. For a child, everyday practices differ from an adult, and in this article, we observe the toys brought from elsewhere as objects that create meaning and connection to the children.

Every human life is more or less embedded in materiality – in close relation to things - which does not necessarily change because of migration and distance; hence things can establish a continuity of everyday life by facilitating “normal” material practices<sup>3</sup>. These artifacts create meaning and social relations. Irrespective of where and how, of the different and difficult contexts, a sensation of normalcy can be created when being with, playing with, these things. When drinking coffee from that same cup as always, hugging that teddy bear before falling asleep, and reading that favorite book one more time, the circumstances of being “here” can become a little less different than from being “there”.

### **Toys from Elsewhere**

Toys are often used as typical symbols of childhood and there are many ways to represent and exhibit children’s material practices<sup>4</sup>. In the exhibition *Moving On*, we are given the opportunity to get to know different artifacts that have been brought from Ukraine to Sweden. We meet a penguin named PinPin, a skateboard, two favorite books, a red panda, and a rabbit. Things of special emotional and personal value to the brave children who share their stories in the exhibition. Frykman means that these objects can be seen as “things to hold on to”, things that help people, in this case, the children, to overcome the differences between locations and social spaces<sup>5</sup>. Many children organize their lives with a very close relationship to certain artifacts. A toy becomes the best friend and without it can be rather impossible to fall asleep. A skateboard becomes a part of your body, taking you everywhere you want or need to go. These things are not unique in their material form – they could probably be easily

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<sup>3</sup> Maja Povrzanović Frykman (2016) *Conceptualizing continuity*. p.47

<sup>4</sup> Eureka Henrich *Children's Toys and Memories of Migration in Australian Museums*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p.49

replaced in any toy store in the globalized world, but the uniqueness is the meaning and the social ties that are attached to them. Holding on to these things is holding on to a social space that does not know of borders and differences. Hugging PinPin is a way to hug the brother who stayed, reading the same book is a way to create that specific moment of intimacy with someone or with oneself and a story. These artifacts create connection, meaning and social relations. Irrespective of where and how, of the different and difficult contexts, a sensation of normalcy can be created when playing with these things.

Migration due to war is and should never ever be considered normal. Everydayness becomes disconnected, unstable and, as Frykman describes it, “every day becomes not so every day and the ‘mundane’ takes on a new significance”<sup>6</sup>. Of course, playing does not happen inseparable from the outside world and ongoing transitions, but the emphasis here is that the toys, and the use of things, remain the same and therefore stabilize a continuity and a possibility to overcome cross-border differences. Such Cross-border differences could come in the form of a cultural shock, a different placement of one thing or the other, simple as a door handle opening the opposite side to what you are used to.

### **Moving On with Things from Elsewhere**

The video recordings and testimonies of the children used in the exhibition reveal an important, and not very common<sup>7</sup>, intimate representation of children as migrants, using their own words and recent memories. The objects are used to provide visual and material support to the children’s narratives. They have a peculiar evocative power<sup>8</sup> that engages the visitor both emotionally and physically. The visitor connects with the objects. They can associate it with their own memories and in that sense, visually interact with the object. In that sense, the visitor goes from viewer to user and becomes an active part of the exhibition.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.48

<sup>7</sup> Eureka Henrich *Children's Toys and Memories of Migration in Australian Museums*

<sup>8</sup> Francesca Lanz (2017) Staging Migration (in) Museums A Reflection on Exhibition Design Practices for the Representation of Migration in European Contemporary Museums. p 181. Politecnico di Milano

The exhibited things from elsewhere are artifacts of a great individual, but not unique, importance. They reach beyond the material value and remind us of the continuity in the use of things when everything else around us has changed. They teach us about connections and overlaps between places and people. One of the main points of observing everyday material practices, in this case, the everyday play, is to make people with or without experience of migration find that there is nothing special with having a favorite toy or thing<sup>9</sup> and that people share that experience in many different contexts around the world. In that sense, when playing with it, we connect with a material culture that does not have borders.

We learn that the thing is not just a thing. We see hands squeezing its soft body, touching its surface, tickled by the soft fake fur of the penguin. There is that palpable beat. A beat of memory, of closeness, of belonging, and of course, of everyday use and everyday life in all its different forms. The thing is not just a thing, it is a connection.

I get by with a little help from my things.

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<sup>9</sup> Maja Povrzanović Frykman (2019) *Transnational Dwelling and Objects of Connection*. p.40

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