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The recalcitrance of distance: exploring the infrastructures of sending in migrants’ lives

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ABSTRACT
This paper puts the spatiality of migration, and more specifically post-migration connections, centre stage. It explores the distances confronted by migrants as they stay connected with their pre-migration lives, recognising that these distances are recalcitrant, asymmetrically governed spaces. Indeed, migrants can be understood as experts in the navigation of international space and ‘the tyranny of distance’. Inspired by recent work on urban and translocal infrastructures and taking the empirical example of migration infrastructures in the lives of Poles and Zimbabweans in the UK, looking particularly at the materiality and logistics of sending things back, this paper builds new discussions about migration which take the spatial, physical and grounded elements of migration and translocalism more seriously.

Introduction: migration and the recalcitrance of distance and geography

This paper is about the role distance plays in migrants’ post-migration lives and the spatial acrobatics migrants engage in to stay connected to people and places they have moved away from. This focus on space and distance comes at an especially poignant time in terms of migrants and the distances they cross in order to migrate. Writing in 2016, we are being daily confronted with the traumatic journeys refugees from Syria and elsewhere are undertaking to reach safety in Europe – confounded by the distances and terrains people have to cross to do this. This paper highlights the role that distance, and indeed geography, still play in the contemporary movement of people. For Syrian refugees distance has not been ‘annihilated’. For people traversing deserts, seas and mountains, travel is an agitated, not frictionless, experience. While these are tragically extreme examples, they remind us of this stubborn, recalcitrant nature of space, distance and geography. They signal the importance of the physical reality of distance and landscape in the movement of people, alongside the political regimes which are simultaneously travelled. They remind us that not all people in all places can access the mobility aids that technology keeps delivering, and that the asymmetries of power at play in migration movements are inequalities which are physically endured. Distance is not an imagined condition.

Some studies have already considered these concerns. Writing about transit migrants in Morocco, Collyer (2007, 668, 684) discusses the physical danger of these journeys, highlighting how people have to hide in the dense forest areas around Melilla and Cueta to steer clear of border guards. In his work on the archaeology of the US-Mexico border, De León (2013) underlines the embodied suffering migrants face as they move through the Sonoran Desert, not just facing the political regimes of guards and barbed wire, but also negotiating an environment of cactus plants, summer temperatures of over...
100 °F and bitter winters, the fall out of which is seared into the garments and water bottles which are
left behind. As he argues, there is a migration-specific habitus (2013, 340) these people are caught up in
as they move. The research this paper rests on is not about such heartbreaking examples of human
mobility in adversity, but it does seek to underline that this notion of the migration-specific habitus still
demands more attention. We need to take distance and geography more seriously when thinking about
migration. We need to notice the frictions which underpin migration, and notice how these are overcome.
Despite the leap forward in mobilities thinking which has developed over the last decade (Sheller
and Urry 2006) this spatiality, and more particularly the distances which migrants travel and re-travel
over time, are still too often rendered invisible and intangible in qualitative accounts of migration. The
research laid out here, then, considers distances not just as metaphorical markers of difference and
otherness in the postcolonial world (Ahmed 2014), but as real, recalcitrant, asymmetrically governed
spaces which migrants have to steer in their real lives. Indeed, migrants can be understood as experts
in the navigation of international space and ‘the tyranny of distance’ (Ley 2004). Inspired by recent work
on urban and translocal infrastructures (McFarlane 2009; Amin 2014), and taking the empirical example
of migration infrastructures in the lives of Poles and Zimbabweans in the UK – looking particularly at
the materiality and logistics of sending things back – this paper builds new discussions about migration
which take the spatial, frictioned, grounded elements of migration more seriously.

Distance, space and mobility

The interdependency of distance, space and mobility is a well established interest in the social sciences.
On the one hand, scholars such as Gregory (1990) have investigated the impact of industrialisation on
the time-space dynamics of Britain, underlining the fundamental shifts reduced travel times brought
in the form of a greater standardisation of time across the country, changing nationally orientated
perceptions of time and distance forever. Others have both focused on the unsettling pace of time-space
compression late modernity has presented us with, from Harvey’s (1990) fear of the annihilation of space
by capitalism to Bauman’s (2000) critique of the consequences of ‘liquid modernity’, and pondered where
this leaves social lives, bonds and trust relations which are being played out as much at a distance as
in proximity (Giddens 1991; Calhoun 1998; Cairncross 2001). While stressing the contemporary reality
of our shrinking world, these writers also reference earlier authors – for example, Harvey (1990, 286,
293) on Simmel and McLuhan, and Calhoun (1998, 374) on Melvin Webber – demonstrating a shared
and longstanding concern for the social costs, as well as possibilities, that the ongoing compression
of space and time and the quest for a frictionless world has heralded. Different problems and observations
may have been voiced, but a common acceptance that time-space compression has been happening,
bringing deep-seated changes in the nature of distance and travel, seems to have been consolidated.

Importantly for this article, however, there has been some degree of pushback against some of the
more generalising tropes on time-space compression. For Massey (2005), space and distance have not
been annihilated in this forward march towards an ever compressing world. Urry (2007, 54), writing
about the reach of the ‘mobilities paradigm’, also views distance as a key part of the analysis of mobility.
Thinking about transnational social movements, Featherstone, Phillips, and Waters (2007, 386) see a
more complex picture of the geography of translocal social connections than time-space compression
allows for and ‘contest those who relate transnational spatialities to simplistic teleologies of increasing
connection and speed’. Focusing on local mobility patterns in Sweden, Ellegård and Vilhelmson (2004,
283) have shown that ‘the friction of distance is still of great importance for most people in daily life’.
Most studies now also draw particular attention to the social stratification of distance and the multiplicity
of spaces (Massey 2005, 77) different people experience, from Massey’s (1993) identification of the
‘power geometry’ of time space compression to Bauman’s (1998) discussion of the winners and losers in
its uneven acceleration. When people travel and migrate they move within wider ‘regimes of mobility’
(Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 188), coming up against ‘differential and multiple forms of power’. So we
are left with a situation where it is obvious that distance still matters. To some extent it still structures
daily life, and in terms of travel and migration, some people are able to cross vast tracks of land with ease while others cannot; mobility experiences are all enacted differently (Gogia 2006, 360). We can also see some of the power structures which still govern this, most clearly the post-colonial legacies being worked through in the visa regimes and infrastructural arrangements of travel, technology and connection which perpetuate and/or disrupt notions of core and periphery, near and far, us and them.

So, with this continued relevance of distance – both political and geographical – acknowledged, it follows that there has been more interest in just how distance is managed, ‘on the ground’, in people’s daily lives. Larsen, Axhausen, and Urry (2006, 266), for example, have focused on how ‘more spatially dispersed social networks’ are nurtured, through different types of meeting and connection, while Cronin (2015) has explored what happens to the intimacy of friendship when it is maintained ‘at-a-distance’. Importantly for this article, Nicholls (2009, 79, 84) notes how significant trust is in the geographical reach of different social networks. Migrants’ transnational practices have also offered particularly fertile ground for these types of explorations, placing more emphasis on revealing the otherwise often hidden effort and labour involved in these nurturings (Conradson and Latham 2005, 228). Ley (2004, 157–158) points out the social costs borne by ‘astronaut’ families, noting that the ‘tyranny of distance’ is still something which has to be faced even by the supposedly hypermobile. Even ease of travel and relative economic privilege cannot eliminate the recalcitrance of distance (Ryan, Klekowski von Koppenfels, and Mulholland 2015). Distance remains highly relevant for family dynamics and the negotiation of kinship after migration (Mason 2004, 421; Baldassar 2007).

Journeys and infrastructures

All this interest in space, time and mobility leads to a closer consideration of the various infrastructures which co-create these mobility regimes. Even though the act and mechanisms of travelling itself has tended to be under emphasised in migration literatures (Burrell 2008b, 2011; BenEzer and Zetter 2015; Hui 2016), it should not be a huge leap for the discussion of space, mobility and migration, as with the social life of the city (Amin 2014, 137), to become a discussion of infrastructure. Infrastructures are an as yet neglected but extremely useful framing point for debates about distance and mobility in the context of migration because they place the spatial dynamics of movement centre stage. To focus on infrastructures is to both centre and fill in the ‘gaps’ of the migration mobility experience, taking in locally nuanced aspects of the physical journey being undertaken. This complicates any latent notions of migrant mobilities as something which unfold along a clearly defined route, as purely transnational or translocal direct undertakings, or as something connecting core and periphery. The real, complicated mechanics of the movements being undertaken can then be brought into focus.

The appeal of the assemblage literature in fleshing out these mobility infrastructures is evident. Drawing on Law and Mol, for example, Featherstone, Phillips, and Waters (2007, 386), suggest that ‘viewing transnational practices as the precarious relational achievements of associations of human and non-human actors opens up important possibilities for understanding the contested, volatile, processual character of transnational geographies’. Transnational practices can be understood as a series of fluid interactions of moving bodies, things, communication cables, transport systems and borders. This approachforegrounds the ‘history, labour, materiality and performance’ of the transnational connections at play across borders, as well as noting the inherent power dynamics and unevenness such connections ultimately have to grapple with (McFarlane 2009, 566, 567). It also allows for greater attention to be paid to the ‘unruly’ (Featherstone, Phillips, and Waters 2007, 386) and responsive nature of infrastructures of travel and movement. As Trovalla and Trovalla (2015, 46) show in their research on infrastructural ‘glitches’ in Jos, Nigeria, while the non-human elements of urban life such as generators exercise a chaotic agency in the workings of the city, the people of the city in turn become part of the infrastructure, through their labour and expertise in its ‘inner logic’. This ‘people as infrastructure’ assertion, along with Merriman’s (2016, 87) interest in ‘different practices of “infrastructuring”,’ are important for this article and its focus on the infrastructures of sending, a practice which is unduly dependent on the infrastructural expertise, activities and trust building capacities of the senders themselves.
If infrastructures in general are dynamic and relational, moreover, it is obvious that they will have emotional properties. While there has been considerable interest in the affective infrastructures of cities (Thrift 2004), travel spaces (Bissell 2010) and mobility security (Adey 2009), it is worth noting that infrastructures of ‘sending’ are of course tied into the broader emotions of keeping in touch and remitting. Aside from the obvious regimes of security at play in travelling and sending, the infrastructures created to stay connected, through communication and materiality, are emotional, relational arrangements. Emotions are clearly implicated, for example, in the technological, communicative infrastructures and attempts at co-presence (Urry 2002) maintained among families separated by migration (Parreñas 2005; Madianou 2012). The physical, as well as virtual, infrastructures of connection and sending, should also be recognised as active parts in the emotional registers of mobility and distance.

The infrastructures of moving things

Keeping these arguments in mind, it is worth noting how more is now being written about the specific infrastructures of moving and sending things in the mobilities literature, with greater interest being taken in ‘cargo mobilities’ (Birchnell, Savitzky, and Urry 2015), including shipping and containerisation (Heins 2015). The global movement of objects raises important questions about how the spaces of non human movements are governed and who is responsible for them. Heins (2015, 347) shows how moving things disrupt carefully maintained national boundaries, yet in doing so rely on national, as well as local and international, infrastructures. Particularly significant for this article is the re-assertion that cargo ship mobilities point to ‘multiple coexisting scales of globalization’ (Heins 2015, 350). As this article will show, many different people, places, vehicles, regulations and inventories are involved in moving things around, at all points on the objects’ travels, and many decisions and actions have to be taken to make these movements possible. A focus on structural and personal logistics (Birchnell and Urry 2013) has also helped highlight the complexity of these webs of movement, ensuring that, like Cook’s (2004) ‘follow the thing’, the laborious workings of these transportation and mobility systems are no longer deemed to be just ‘magic’ or rendered invisible (Birchnell and Urry 2015, 30). Studies of the economic contexts of these cargomobilities are particularly revealing in this respect. While Gregson (2015) notes the increased precarity of the haulage workers themselves, tied up in the ever demanding needs of the just-in-time delivery economy, in their research on the courier service industry Taylor and Hallsworth (2000) observe the competitive and fast moving nature of the sector, caught between different sets of national regulations, technological innovations and consumer and industry demands.

As indicated, this article will focus on migrants’ practices of sending – an activity which is highly dependent on this courier service industry. At least for the migrants who participated in this study, the easiest way to send things to Poland or Zimbabwe was via a courier of some sort. Surprisingly, very little has been written about the role this industry plays in the wider infrastructure of migration and post-migration connections. Even the vast literature on migrant remittances has neglected the physical, material dimension of sending money (Nyangunda 2014, 38), although some studies do highlight the importance of couriers in remitting practices, particularly in relation to the diversity of remittance channels used by different migrants, ranging from electronic transfers, personal and family contacts, train conductors and mini-bus drivers, to more ‘official’ manual couriers (Siegel and Luecke 2013, 122). The ‘people as infrastructure’ perspective is evidently pertinent for remittance activities, with relevant studies emphasising the different levels of in/formality involved in money transfers, and the importance of trust in holding these infrastructures together (Piekke, Van Hear, and Lindley 2007, 358). As Piekke, Van Hear, and Lindley (2007, 361–362) further point out, the official infrastructures associated with remitting have not kept pace with an increase in global migration movements and the accompanying desire to send money, so more ‘alternative’ infrastructures have emerged to fill these neglected spaces of sending. A focus on different remitting practices to and within Africa, for example, underlines the diversity of remittance routes used and of regional norms and regulations, as well as the unevenness of cost and speed for transferring money to and between different African countries (Piekke, Van Hear, and Lindley 2007, 357). Asymmetric regimes of mobility are just as relevant for money (and things)
as people (Lindley 2009). Local, national, and regional contexts matter. Nyamunda (2014, 44) notes how the financial situation in Zimbabwe contributed to an increase in informal services as trust in public services and access to formal banks eroded. It is no surprise, too, that this situation has led to an increase in small-scale and local remittance entrepreneurialism (Mbiba 2011), as people again create for themselves the infrastructures they need.

So, if there is some understanding of how migrants send money, alongside the wider economic contexts of the practicalities of remitting, practices associated with the sending of non-monetary objects remain more opaque (although see Abranches 2013; Vilar Rosales 2010). There is much more focus on why migrants often choose to send things back, rather than on how they do it. For Cliggett (2005, 38), what is sent back is less important than the social relationships the sending of things reinforces. Sending things (Miller 2008) demonstrates to family and friends that they have not been forgotten (McKenzie and Menjívar 2011, 69–70). It is also a means of giving care, meeting obligations, or cementing status. There is something distinctive too about sending something real and solid to someone far away as a means of physically reaching out to them (Frykman 2009; Vilar Rosales 2010). The desire to send gifts, clothes, food, medicine and sofas can be seen in itself as an attempt to bridge the physical distance that migration has created – material culture can connect people as powerfully as communication technology and has the advantage of, food aside, providing a solid presence, and greater longevity of this presence, even when the other person is far away. So the materiality and the sociality tied up in sending are again difficult to unpick. There are still gaps in our understanding of this though. The difficulties people face when they send things are usually reported as being mainly related to gift practices and reciprocity (Mauss 1970), such as whether sending things can compensate for the distance which migration has opened up, whether the act of sending can ever be suitably repaid, and whether the migrants can even afford to keep up this obligation to send something, money or otherwise (Lindley 2009). Any tangible, practical barriers to sending are usually more hidden in these studies, although Polish migrants’ narratives of sending and carrying goods from the UK to Poland during and after the socialist regime highlight perfectly the extent to which sending and carrying are physical, material undertakings, complete with heavy suitcases, loaded-up cars and attentive border guards (Burrell 2008a, 2008b).

This article brings these wide-ranging debates together to underline the practical, logistical dimensions of sending in Polish and Zimbabwean migrants’ lives. Through an assertion of the importance of the physical and material attributes of post-migration relationships and practices the paper will consider two overlapping themes; the attempts which are made ‘on the ground’ to overcome the recalcitrant distances that migration has opened up through the use of different sending practices and infrastructures; and the emotional and relational properties which are imbued in this physical transportation of things.

### Research and methods

This research is based on in-depth interviews with 35 Polish and Zimbabwean migrants in the UK, in the East Midlands and North West. Of the 23 Polish respondents, 15 were women and eight were men. Most were in their 20s or 30s and had moved to the UK, young and single, within three years of the 2004 enlargement of the EU to find work or study. Of the 12 Zimbabwean participants, seven were men and five were women. These participants were slightly older, generally in their 40s to early 50s, and had been in the UK most typically around 15 years. While one person had arrived as a refugee most had come to study or work in specific professions (such as nursing), or to join partners who were doing so, at around the turn of the century when Zimbabwe’s economy sharply deteriorated.

Interviews centred on the general background to people’s migration experiences and journeys and then followed more focused questions on the material aspects of their migrations and connections – specifically things which are sent and carried back, and, if applicable, received, asking what is sent, when, to whom, why and, crucially, how. The Polish interviews in particular included photos of key items selected and described by the participants. Interviews were undertaken by myself (in English) and two research assistants, one Polish (interviews undertaken in Polish and transcribed/translated by the researcher) and one Zimbabwean (interviews undertaken in English). Evidently each researcher came to the research
from a different position. The Polish researcher was able to embed herself with the Polish population in Blackpool and spent hours with each participant, sharing her own experiences with them, which were often very similar theirs. The Zimbabwean researcher, of Shona background, interviewed both Shona and Ndebele participants, and while this was a potentially sensitive position (McGregor 2009), the focus on material culture and sending in the interviews offered a relatively neutral discussion point, away from any overtly political topics. As an English researcher, my own interviews with both Poles and Zimbabweans were different again, with less opportunity to share discussions of common experiences, but perhaps more scope to ask for additional detail and talk around the topics. So while we all shared the same set of interview questions, and ethical framework, for the project, we all had slightly different approaches, inevitably shaped by a range of factors such as migration background, gender, age, class and personality (Moser 2008). To ensure that I still felt connected to the interviews the researchers had undertaken I had ‘debriefing’ meetings with them, talking about the interviews and (translated) transcripts. While much has been discussed about the relative merits and limitations of interview research, interviewing in depth proved to be the most appropriate method for this project, teasing out the practical and emotional intricacies of sending things to family and friends (Hitchings 2012).

The research focused on these two groups for several reasons. Poles and Zimbabweans are significant minorities in the UK’s ethnic makeup (McGregor 2007; Burrell 2009); their experiences have a wider resonance for migration in the UK, and all of the people interviewed had arrived within the past 10 to 15 years and so were in good position to notice any changes in migration regimes and sending provisions over that time. Crucially, both groups are very active across transnational/translocal spaces (Bloch 2008; Magunha, Bailey, and Cliffe 2009; Mercer, Page, and Evans 2009; Burrell 2011; Ryan 2011; White 2011). Anecdotally and through previous research I was aware that sending things, rather than just money, was particularly important to both populations (Burrell 2008b) – a key aim of the wider project was to explore whether this importance of sending was manifested differently for the different participants. Although there have been strong critiques of the ‘ethnic lens’ in migration research (Schiller, Çağlar, and Guldbrandsen 2006), focusing on two specific groups has also allowed for geography and distance to be analysed more explicitly. Poles and Zimbabweans move in different mobility regimes (Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2011; Botterill 2011), their translocal connections play out within distinct but overlapping geo-political landscapes and their geographies of travel and mobility vary, so another central aim of the project was to consider whether the journeys undertaken by these sent things are also, and inevitably, different.

Confronting recalcitrant distances

Before considering the journeys and distances which the sent items undertake it is useful to think about the journeys the migrants themselves have to make to visit friends and family in Poland or Zimbabwe. Despite the much discussed increase in global travel connections, travelling to Zimbabwe and even to Poland still takes time, effort and often considerable money. Even though Poland and the UK are, at the time of writing, both within the EU, politically this mobility regime does not fall completely within the Schengen zone, and practically the different available means of travel still have their drawbacks. Low-cost flights may signify an era of hyper mobility in Europe and a geographical extension of continental time-space compression, but they can be stressful, expensive, inconveniently timed and not generous enough in terms of luggage allowance, as well as being structurally vulnerable to air carrier strategic route changes (Burrell 2008b, 2011). Alternatively, going by road, whether by car or coach, makes for a very long journey. In their interview, Adam and Ania spoke about their travel plans, framing the distance to Poland in both kilometres/miles and hours, and noting improvements in driving infrastructure over time:

… if I drive to Poland [by] car, it’s 1100 miles one-way, a 24 hour drive, and the best time has been 17 hours, the worst 26 hours … We go from Leicester to Dover, from Dover ferry to Dunkirk in France, from France to Belgium, Holland, Germany and Poland. In France it’s just a 25 minutes drive, it’s a short way 50 km; later it’s two hours in Belgium; two hours in Holland; and nearly 900 km just in Germany … they opened a new motorway in Poland and
I have all the time motorway ... all roads in Poland we had were one line one-way, and one line in the second way. You can overtake nobody, and you drive behind truck, or something, 45 mph, and we have 300 km, it's 200 miles from Germany to Konin, so that would be six, seven hours to drive. Now just two and a half, three hours and we're home. (Adam and Ania, born mid- to late 70s, came to UK in 2005 – Adam speaking)

This testimony is illuminating because while Adey (2009, 199) suggests that global mobility has transformed so much that it now makes more sense to think of mobilities in terms of time spent travelling rather than miles or kilometres covered, the two are equally important in Adam's discussion of their journey back. When you are driving from the UK to Poland physical distance, counting off the kilometres is relevant indeed (Collyer 2007, 685).

For the Zimbabwean participants, travelling back to Zimbabwe is complicated not just by physical distance but by the loss of direct flights which forcibly brings different places into the itinerary. According to Lawrence:

in terms of the travel itself, now it's gotten a bit better, but I would have preferred that we still had our own airline to have a direct easier flight back, back to Zim, but unfortunately it's not operating at the moment ... So you'll have to have a stopover ... in Kenya or Egypt or whichever way you are going South Africa. (Lawrence, born 1970, came to UK 1999)

The mobility regimes at play for Zimbabweans in the UK wishing to travel back are manifold; not just the need for the right visa and travel documents to satisfy border regulations in both places, but also the regimes shaped by the shifting commercial and economic fortunes and interests of different air carriers and Zimbabwe itself. Both the Polish and Zimbabwean migration routes, then, have their challenges and quirks, and in both of these so called ‘global north’ and ‘global south’ examples, even in the hyper mobile EU context of Poland-UK movement, the vulnerability of the journey infrastructures to wider commercial and geo-political forces is evident and the distances being travelled are physically significant.

The mobility regimes involved in migrant sending practices can be explored in the same way. The things – the meaningful cargos – participants send to Poland and Zimbabwe also have to travel long distances and so the choice of route and means have to be made carefully, in the same way that journey plans are formed. Different sending options were discussed, from the ‘big name’ companies such as DHL and Western Union to small-scale private courier businesses, to sending things with friends and family members. The two groups of participants did reveal varying sending practices. Bigger packages and bulkier items (including sale and second-hand clothes, handbags, business equipment, even furniture) were more likely to be sent to Zimbabwe, usually by container ship, as personally chosen gifts for family and friends, items particularly selected in order to help out family there and sometimes equipment to support commercial activity. Smaller parcels of carefully selected things for family and friends (clothes, perfume, toys, branded items, general gifts) tended to be sent to Poland by private couriers.

The Polish participants varied more in sending practices; while some were extremely enthusiastic, regular senders, others said they did not really bother much or at all. Among the Polish respondents, couriers were more likely to be used to send things in both directions – gifts such as special food and products sent from family in Poland, or items from previous homes transported to the UK. Family and friends were also entrusted with couriering things. The Zimbabwean respondents were more likely to definitely send things, but did so less often, and third party sending was exclusively one way among those interviewed, reflecting a starker differentiation in income and a different infrastructural landscape, although people did bring gifts and items back with them after visiting, for themselves and other people. There is no scope here to explore the reasons behind these sending practices, which will be discussed elsewhere, but rather the focus here is on the logistics this sending exposes.

Sending to Zimbabwe from the UK is a serious undertaking. Email correspondence with one courier service in Leicester suggested that this specific business alone sends things for about 100 different people each week, accounting for between one-and-a-half and three tons of goods a week, depending on the time of year. Typically this is shipped from Sheerness Port in Kent or Immingham Port in Lincolnshire to Walvis Bay Namibia, then on to Durban where drivers are ready to move into Zimbabwe. Air freight is inevitably more expensive but quicker, with an expected delivery to Harare and other major towns and
cities within five to seven days. Neither route offers a direct door-to-door service – if recipients do not live in the larger towns and cities additional travel arrangements need to be made privately to collect or transport the goods. If you want to send something more quickly there are other options: Ken and Hazel (born early 1970s, came to UK 2001), for example, used Western Union to send some special hats for Hazel’s sister’s church because these were needed urgently, but this was a more unusual example – most people used the cheaper locally arranged shipping services. Sending was so important for Bukhosi that at the time of our meeting he had just purchased a lorry with a container for this purpose – to send a sofa to his mother, alongside equipment for her business. His interview especially highlighted the importance of physical geography and distance, not to mention effort, time and expense, in sending.

One of the reasons why I went to Africa about four weeks ago was because I bought a lorry, a 32 ton lorry, because it’s a container, it’s got a box at the back and if we ever wanted to send anything we put things in there. And we divided between us the costs and I went to clear this, so as soon as it went through I just came back.

I: So who would drive it, how do you get a lorry to Zimbabwe?

B: You send it from here to Namibia, a port called Walvis Bay, which is about 2400 km from Zimbabwe. And so I flew to South Africa and then I picked up my brother and my nephew and a driver, who’s licensed to drive that truck because I can’t drive it. And then I have got four cars in Zimbabwe now that we send from here. No three from here and one we bought from South Africa. So we took one of the cars and we drove across the Kalahari Desert, Botswana and through Namibia, picked up the lorry and drove back.

I: That’s quite a journey.

B: It is three days drive, three days and nights, and then it’s the same back but it’s much longer when you’re going back with a lorry, it’s not as fast as a smaller vehicle. (Bukhosi, born mid-1960s, came to UK 2003)

Such long and varied journeys are perhaps expected for sending to Zimbabwe from the UK – it is an unavoidably long journey which stretches across many different landscapes. What is also interesting, however, is that some of the Polish interviews also revealed the significance of physical distance in sending practices. Most of the people interviewed used small, private courier companies to send parcels, either through their local Polish shop or just a company recommended to them or their friends or family, often based in Poland. Transported by road, it can typically take a week for parcels to reach their destination and sometimes this service is not ‘door to door’ either, with packages having to be dropped and/or collected at specific and not always convenient locations. Wiktoria described how she once had had to travel from Blackpool to Southport (at least a one-hour drive) to send her package:

Last time we had to go all the way to Southport to send a parcel. The company we’ve ordered the service with said they are late with orders and they won’t be able to make it Blackpool to our house to pick up our parcel and they said if we still want them to take our things to Poland we have to do it from Southport. (Wiktoria, born 1989, came to UK 2008)

Monika and Lew used a Polish courier service to bring some furniture back to the UK from Poland and were struck by how tired the drivers were, driving across Europe in an old van, at the sharp end of this logistics expansion (Gregson 2015):

L: … we used one for the furniture, it was a really small company, three vans.

M: The guy came here, had a glass of coke, and then he chatted to us for two hours.

L: He was knackered.

M: Two of them driving but he said it was horrible, and the van was rented, an old thing. (Monika and Lew, born early 1980s, came to UK 2006 and 2007)

The physical journey is not only testing for the human actors involved – it also takes its toll on the things being sent. Most of the Polish respondents, although generally happy with the services available for sending, had at least one experience of items getting lost or damaged en route. Emilia described that she had discovered that a parcel containing her clothes sent to her by her parents by DHL had:

… hit something hard – when they were throwing it to go on the carousel and it fell and hit a wall and everything opened fell out. But that’s not the end of the story. My mum put some cosmetics in for me, I think it was a body
lotion and some creams, which cracked open because of that hit and because the parcel was left like that for a few weeks everything started to mould. There was mould everywhere, including my white wedding jacket … everything was for the bin only. My mum put some toys in that my son left but they were broken too. I think somebody drove over it or something, it was really bad. I was so upset. (Emilia, born 1982, came to UK 2005)

These examples underline the frictioned nature of sending things. It may be possible to ‘face time’ and Skype, to send messages to loved ones which can be received almost instantaneously, and to transfer money electronically (although all these can still bring frustrations and costs too), but, as with corporeal travel itself, sending material items is far more convoluted. Emotional distance can perhaps be reduced, but physical distance remains. There is something about the logistical demands of sending a sofa from the UK to Zimbabwe, or a parcel to Poland, which amplifies the distance between the countries. Cargomobility and travel infrastructures are therefore clearly limited in what they are able to do – they are not all-conquering. What stands out here too is even though the journeys that things on their way to Zimbabwe undertake are long and interrupted, crossing a range of geographical and political terrains, the journeys of things making their way across a supposedly (although now decreasingly) ultra mobile European Union still have to cover long distances and withstand the physicality of this movement. They are also equally, if not more, temporally vulnerable to wider geo-political impacts on continental mobility regimes – consider the impact of ‘Brexit’ on these arrangements. This insight should urge us to challenge the continued siloing of migration literature amid all these relevant debates on (cargo) mobilities and infrastructures (Hui 2016). Migration and all its ensuing social and emotional connections cannot take place without these infrastructures, and at the same time it is migration experiences like these which really underline the significance cargo mobility infrastructures have in people’s – and not just migrants’ – everyday lives. In ‘real’ life the two need each other, just as they do in academic discussion, and there is scope especially for migration research to acknowledge this more.

Dynamic and relational infrastructures

These examples also reveal something else which is fundamental to the infrastructures behind this type of cargo mobility. Experiences of parcels being damaged have elevated the importance of the practical aspects of sending; the packaging of items was a topic which was discussed in all of the interviews held with keen senders. Many respondents already had strategies for their own travels with luggage – the type of suitcase to use to best withstand rough handling at the airport, how to package certain foodstuffs in their bags – and this pragmatism extended to the use of couriers. Wiktoria and her boyfriend have become experts in packaging things to send, and as such have become experts in the ‘infrastructuring’ (Merriman) of sending:

We always have to think how to pack, wrap these gifts, things. When we send tools we always wrap them in bubble wrap, secure the wrap with strong black tape, I think it’s this type of tape you use for insulation. Inside the box we try to put layers, starting with clothes, and clothes around and then tools, and then clothes again and in empty spaces we put little things, such as jewellery, etc … I always leave packing these parcels to my boyfriend, he is really good at it. We usually send things in one big box. He works for a windows and doors company so he gets good, strong boxes from work, they are really thick and can carry a lot of weight. If a box is too big he cuts it himself and makes it smaller, he is a specialist now.

The things the Zimbabwean respondents send seem less vulnerable as they travel, perhaps more protected through containerisation, but packing concerns were still evident. Tadiwa explained how she had to buy a ‘drum’ to send items to her sister in Zimbabwe:

… from talking to a friend, I mean I had heard of this use of drums but I had never done it, so I was talking to my friend about it and asked her if she knew anybody who does it, and then she told me and gave me the name of the person. So then I spoke to the person and then he bought the drum for me, it is actually a water butt, but we call them just straight drums, so that person brought that water butt and then I packed, it was mainly clothes, shoes, bedding that I couldn’t use any more. A few handbags. (Tadiwa, born 1970, came to UK 1999)

This, then, is the multi-scalar, socio-materiel element of sending made visible, where people have to find or generate their own sending infrastructures using acquired skills. When Tadiwa and Wiktoria’s boyfriend find and adapt their sending vessels, they are, just like the people of Jos (Trovalla and Trovalla
creating segments of this sending infrastructure themselves. Sending does not start in the ports – there is a back-story to this infrastructure which is created by the senders themselves.

This observation leads to the final point here, that these infrastructures of sending are clearly dynamic, responsive and relational and are actors in the wider emotional dramas of migration. In terms of dynamism, courier services in general seem to be a product of a particular entrepreneurial response to inadequate existing opportunities to send things (Piek, Van Hear, and Lindley 2007, 362). The Zimbabwean courier I emailed set up her business because she saw other Zimbabweans had done the same, and because there was still a real need for more capacity in this type of service. Similarly, many of the Polish small courier service businesses have been responding to a new economic need.

In terms of social relations and emotions, as sending itself is a hugely meaningful activity, it follows that the practice of sending also opens up new emotional experiences and social bonds. The frustrations, costs and efforts of sending are clear in the previous examples and are highlighted when people have to deal directly with problems caused by courier services or lost or damaged things. Bukhosi’s narration of the journey of his new lorry and container is also a tale of innovation of practice – a lorry with its own container was needed, so a lorry with a container was somehow bought:

There are courier services, except that I have done better than that. What I do is I send them myself now. This is a development since about last year but one, because I was sending things, but then if you look at us and our friends, we felt that we were sending so much. So we decided, actually, instead of sending through a courier, we could do this on our own and then get others who want to send things to join us. So this is what I’ve been doing.

Alongside innovation, trust, shared knowledge and collaboration are also key in sending practices. Tadiwa only found about the ‘drums’ for sending things to Zimbabwe, and how to buy one, through a friend; Bukhosi mobilised a whole network of friends to be able to buy the container lorry. For some respondents sending with family and friends is still preferable, providing a more trustworthy transportation infrastructure than couriers – more than one Polish respondent claimed that after a bad experience they no longer trusted the courier companies at all. The national context is particularly important here too. Monika and Lew were amused to find that the Polish courier drivers they met were following ‘typically Polish’ business practices, arising from an apparent and customary vacuum of trust between the drivers and their boss (Kozłowska 2010). While unlikely to instil much new trust, this was at least familiar to them:

M:  He said that he’s not planning to work for the boss anymore, and he gave us his business card for the new business.

L:  It’s quite funny here such stories that people are doing those unofficial businesses, but in Poland it’s normal. Obviously people who live in Poland but work as drivers for those companies they’re still Polish, and they still think in the Polish way, and so when they come here they chat like they do in Poland. (Monika and Lew, born early 1980s, came to UK 2006 and 2007)

In the Zimbabwean interviews, local knowledge and context also seemed key, and was a reason for trusting the logistics of the service at least. According to Zumani,

… the ones I’ve used, particular in Leicester, it’s mainly been by Zimbabweans because they know the place well, even their estimated times, they will tell you if you’re sending to Bulawayo or Harare it will take so much because of this and that. So usually they’re owned, or my impression is that they were owned by Zimbabweans because they seem to speak the local language. (Zumani, born 1961, came to UK 2005)

The final point to make here is to stress how Bukhosi’s lorry’s journey, and the courier service used by Monika and Lew, were very obviously dependent on the efforts of the drivers (and a whole cast of other as yet unnoticed characters), a reminder again of the human labour expended in keeping ‘cargo’ mobile (Cook 2004; Gregson 2015) and indeed the human work and vulnerability which facilitate, and in many cases problematise, mobilities infrastructures more generally (Cresswell 2006; Mah 2015). So having spent so long asserting the centrality of materiality to understanding the world (Whatmore 2006), it is important to keep reasserting how the material is inextricable from the social. For Zosia, in fact, sending the gifts she carefully picks out for her family in Poland via courier is unthinkable; these things are so much a part of her social and emotional bonds that she needs to be able to physically give them directly:
we always take things with us, just into the luggage. Because I, when I buy these gifts I want to be there and to give it to them. I don’t want them to open it, I want to be there. (Zosia, born 1986, came to UK 2004)

No third party sending infrastructure is able to reduce the space which separates her from her family in Poland; the only way she can reconcile this distance is to cross it herself.

Conclusions

Sending things is an important part of the reconfiguration of post-migration life for many migrants. The tangibility of ‘things’, rather than electronically transferred money or communications, is highly significant in attempts to reconstruct a sense of proximity in the face of physical distance. Sending and receiving things creates a new kind of co-presence through material culture, albeit an ultimately inadequate one, but a lasting one nevertheless. It is this relative durability that the materiality of sending things affords. But these things which are sent to do not just magically teleport to their destination; this ordinary yet highly meaningful practice is infrastructurally fascinating. This article has highlighted three aspects of this practice in particular.

Firstly, the decision to focus on Polish and Zimbabwean migrants has underlined the unevenness of cargomobility infrastructures in different migrants’ lives, but not necessarily in the most expected ways. The longer and multifarious journeys made by objects sent from the UK to Zimbabwe clearly reflect the more recalcitrant distance and geography between the two countries, but parcels sent by courier to Poland from the UK can still take up to a week to arrive, crossing the Channel in the process. The geography of the available routes to each of the countries also suggests that, at least in the interviews collected for this project, the third party sending of things to Zimbabwe is more formalised as it needs to be orchestrated through key ports, abide by freight and container norms and regulations and logged by the courier companies. In comparison, there are currently still very few regulatory barriers to driving a private van across Europe between Poland and the UK. That might be why there were so many more complaints about lost and damaged items, even taking into account the different number of people interviewed, voiced by the Polish participants. Greater freedom of mobility may bring cheaper and quicker sending options but this does not necessarily translate into a better, more reliable service all round. Such freedom of mobility is, at the same time, vulnerable to wider geo-political forces. This is an important point because it urges us to resist a pressure to still see the world in terms of north and south, where the ‘global north’ is more ‘developed’ in terms of mobility and where time-space compression has raced ahead in one region but not another. The examples here disrupt this image; the relevant factors in sending are varied and more nuanced than this, interpersonal, temporal and multiscalar.

Secondly, this article, through these examples, has emphasised just how much distance does still matter; it has categorically not been annihilated. Distances measured by geography, landscape and itineraries, by kilometres and miles, by days and weeks, by the physical jeopardy things face en route, by human fatigue, by costs and rates, by packaging strategies, are all part of the process of sending. Looking at a practice like sending is important because it forces us to fill in the gaps in the way we imagine the movement of things, noticing the real journeys which are undertaken through these connections. It reminds us of the ultimate limitations we still have in our abilities to build infrastructures which can physically transport things and bodies quickly. Not only does distance still matter, but it has remained recalcitrant, manifested as stubborn stretches of space which still require time and effort to cross. Distance does not just ‘melt into air’, but exists in all its obstacles, borders and terrains.

Finally, what this article has also presented is a series of responses to this distance – of trust arrangements, shared knowledge, entrepreneurialism, make-shift packaging, long drives across Europe and Africa – all of which assemble to become key in the wider infrastructures of sending. This underlines the common sense appeal of assemblage, that the social and the material are mutual components of any given situation or structure. This presents further opportunities for migration scholars to acknowledge more deeply this socio-material relationship and to highlight the infrastructural dependence of migration movements and post-migration connections. It also opens up new space for those interested in cargo mobilities to consider in more depth these ad hoc, informal and smaller-scale infrastructural
innovations, demonstrating the ways in which goods are not exclusively moved around the world via formal and regimented shipping and airfreight operations. Ordinary people and their shared knowledge, trust and development of specialist skills also oil the ‘wheels’ of cargomobility outside those obvious spaces of mobility such as ports and airports; in the examples presented here cargomobility infrastructure is being created in people’s homes. Sending as a practice, then, opens up new areas of exploring our ever shifting relationships with time, space and distance.

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