

# WHAT HOME MEANS TO THE NOMAD. *Summary*

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This article grew out of discursive breakdowns in conversations with our informants, female migrant laborers who work as traders in the markets of Saint Petersburg. We were especially confused by their use of the phrase “at home...,” for it was not always clear from the context of the conversation where this “home” was. For us, this puzzlement, which regularly arose during the course of these conversations, finally became a research question. Where is the migrant’s home? What is it like? More broadly, what does “home” mean for the migrant? What meanings and social significance is it endowed with?

The present study focuses on women who have come from other parts of the former Soviet Union to Saint Petersburg in search of work. Until recently, the majority of migrant workers in Russia were men. This gender imbalance had to do first of all with the traditional distribution of gender roles: the man, who is responsible for the family, is forced to take risks, i.e. active steps to improve his family’s economic situation, and so he decides to emigrate. In recent years, we can observe a slightly different picture. According to our research, during 2009–10, the proportion of female migrant workers has significantly increased. These changes in migration patterns are caused by changes in immigration laws and market conditions. It is not only and not so much unskilled male labor that the market demands, but also “traditionally” female occupations, which in the end leads to a significant increase in female immigration.

With rare exceptions, female migrants have been passed over by researchers: the majority of Russian scholarly publications dealing with immigration are indifferent to gender, but in fact they are implicitly focused exclusively on male immigration. On the contrary, we see it as extremely fruitful to investigate precisely female labor migration. For women from the former Soviet Union, mobility and migration prove to be a radical experience of independence; in a certain sense, a spontaneous feminist project. In their accounts of the experience of immigration, we can detect motifs of emancipation and the acquisition of independence, be it freedom from domestic tyranny, financial freedom, or the freedom to make decisions independently. It seems particularly worthwhile to research how female migrants master and settle new places, restructure the spaces of their own lives, and create a new home and new place of residence, because an attachment to home has been traditionally ascribed

precisely to women, something that is considerably problematized by the circumstance of immigration itself.

## FOCUSING THE RESEARCH LENS

The home—or, rather, its conceptualization—can be imagined as a kind of intersection or even rendezvous point for a variety of social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, environmental psychology, social and cultural geography, history, and social studies of architecture and design. In our research, we have focused only on one of the numerous vectors of this discussion, namely, research on the home and geographic mobility and migration.

Until the Seventies and Eighties, an approach that accepted sedentarism as the norm reigned in studies of the home. In this approach, home is understood as a space of safety, invulnerability, permanency, stability, and uniqueness, and it constitutes a source of value for the people who inherit it. From this viewpoint, such phenomena as geographic mobility, mass culture, and standard housing construction destroy the particular attachment to place, the special relationship to it, and generate a sense of homelessness (Cuba and Hummon 1993: 550). The loss of home threatens people not only with material privations, but also with the destruction of a customary domestic milieu, an atmosphere of privacy, and a sense of life's predictability.

Over time, researchers came to understand home not only as physical place, but also as the symbolic and social aspects of everyday life. If home is not a set of walls but the practices, emotions, and meanings that constitute home, the question of how these things change for people who for various reasons are deprived of a stable home—migrants, refugees, settlers, guest workers, and travelers—is of interest to researchers. The previously alien concept of mobility penetrated studies of the home.

In the early Nineties, a post-national, anti-sedentarist trend in research based on the concepts of globalization, transnationalism, transborderness, and flows became influential. Moving ceased to mean the loss of home; on the contrary, as Karen Olwig has argued, home is constituted precisely in the process of relocation (Olwig 1998: 225–236). Home is no longer conceptualized as a static place but as a dynamic process that involves the imagination, creation, destruction, change, loss, and dislocation of *homes*. Fundamental to this approach is the notion of home as something multi-local, contextual, mobile, contradictory, and fluid. Contemporary discussions of the meaning of home for migrants are likewise based on the logic of assimilation and transnationalism. It unites two trends in research: 1) the perception of home amongst transmigrants who preserve their ties with the communities that send them out into the world, their places of origins or homelands; 2) the relocation of the immigrant's nomadic home as dwelling and the imperative of identity in the receiving community.

In our research, we present ethnographic descriptions of the daily practices used by female migrants in the "production of home" and analyze the notions that form their multifaceted conceptions of home. In the accounts of these women we

can distinguish three levels or three spatially expansive and intersecting conceptions of home: 1) home as dwelling, as domicile; 2) home as a place of residence, which in our case is the city that has accepted these immigrants; 3) homeland or the “home that remains back home.” We then go on to examine of these concepts in detail.

### HOME AS DWELLING: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRANT’S HOME AND “DOMESTIC” PRACTICES

The concept of the migrant’s home qua dwelling is primarily shaped by two factors that are bound up with the specific nature of migrant labor. First, the instability of work and frequent changes of jobs lead to frequent changes in place of residence as well. Second, heavy work schedules mean that migrants do not spend long periods of time at home.

The migrant’s home is *unstable, unsettled*. Nearly all our informants have changed their place of residence several times during their years in the city. Female migrants, whether alone, with their families or in cooperation with other migrants, usually rent rooms in dormitories, communal flats or single-family apartments, as well as in residential buildings whose legal residents have been moved out (that is, the immigrants for all intents and purposes squat these buildings). The migrant’s home is *light*; it is *laconic* and *ascetic*. Dwellings are minimally furnished: the migrants bring only their clothes with them from their homelands, and furniture is limited to what has been provided by a flat’s owner or to furniture picked out of trash dumps. Even in cases where a certain degree of stability exists—for example, when a person has lived in one place for a lengthy period of time—dwellings are practically unfurnished. Female migrants, who have arrived in a new place in order to earn money, prefer to minimize their financial expenditures, including housing costs. They do not attempt to put down roots, to settle down in a new apartment, thus according themselves and their families mobility, the ability to readjust quickly, to pack up their lives in boxes and move away, to change dwellings.

The furnishings in the migrant’s home are not a mirror of identity. Thus, in the homes of our informants, all things are maximally functional; they are not meant to “conceptually match the interior design.” There is one other quality of the migrant’s home that is an element of the overall conception—according to our observations, this is its *relative openness*. Private life spills out from one’s own room into the space beyond. Doors are kept open, laundry is dried in the common spaces of the apartment or the hallways of the dormitory, parties are held “for everyone” in the communal kitchen, and even shish kebabs are roasted outside in the courtyard.

Our informants, who sometimes spend twelve hours a day on the job, rarely discuss leisure time at home. Focused on securing economic independence for themselves and financially supporting their children, they are practically excluded from acting as diligent housewives in the space of private life. This space takes on significance as a temporary venue where they have a short breather before the new workday begins. The busy work lives of our informants enable them to reinterpret the responsibility for domestic life and the raising of children traditionally assigned to

women; they shift this responsibility to men, thus overturning the traditional gender regime in the family.

Home is thus only a space for relaxation before and after work. We might even say that a home of this sort is a kind of juncture, a constellation of dwelling and workplace. Home is partially dislocated: it is “grafted” onto work. Work, on the contrary, “comes” home—for example, market traders stockpile their produce and wares at home. The migrant’s home is not tied to a particular place, and in this sense is diffuse and delocalized. It has no strictly delineated boundaries, which render it open and thus strip it of its original, essential meaning. Undefined and fluid boundaries transform the private space of the home into something transitional, transient. It is practically incapable of evoking emotional involvement and attachment.

### THE CITY THAT BECAME HOME...

For female migrants, the workplace becomes a reference point in the space of the city, the point around which all other space is arranged and structured. The city begins at this point, and it is from here that our informants assimilate and render habitable previously unknown territory. However, as a rule they render habitable only their workplaces and the immediate environs. The interests of our informants almost do not extend any further than this.

In the search of higher wages and better relationships with their bosses (they are much less concerned about more comfortable work conditions), nearly all our informants regularly and fairly easily change jobs and occupations. It is worth noting that their home “moves” along with their place of work, for in such instances the migrants try to find housing closer to work in order to avoid huge expenditures of time and money on travel around the city. Thus, for the female guest workers, the city is primarily their workplace and place of residence. Leisure-time Petersburg, on the other hand, is an imaginary city, a city depicted in tourist brochures and a matter of “common knowledge.”

In the picture of the city painted by our informants there is practically no center and no outskirts, none of the official city districts and their administrative boundaries. The city seems discrete to them primarily because these women rarely travel around the city. The subway is the only form of transportation that they use more actively in cases of necessity. However, the city does in fact form an integral picture for our female migrants. Easily changing workplaces and transporting their home with them “in boxes,” the women move around the city, gradually mastering and assimilating it. The home/work linkage migrates and reproduces itself across the entire area of the city, filling previously empty space with sites that are meaningful to the women. And yet the way they structure the city proves to be congruent with the subway map.

Although they had previously lived in small towns and villages, nearly all our informants told us that they felt fairly comfortable in Petersburg. They also denied feeling frightened by this huge, unfamiliar city—first of all, because from their perspective the city turned out to be not so huge; second, because the women did

not have any sense that they had moved to another country or changed citizenship. As in Soviet times, Saint Petersburg is not any way perceived by them as the space of a foreign country; it is Russia, "not Italy or Turkey," where relatives and acquaintances of our informants also work.

To summarize, it is the city, as a localized place of practices, that becomes home for the female guest workers, for it is a space that is safe, that they have rendered habitable and made their own. Notwithstanding the apparent localization and limitations of their lives, the female migrants easily move around the city: they change their places of work and residence, and thus do not become attached only to one particular neighborhood or district.

### **THE "HOME THAT REMAINS BACK HOME": THE FORMER AND UNREAL HOME**

Fairly often in our conversations the women referred to their previous experiences, recalling what home was like in their homelands and what was happening there in the present. Our informants devised and proposed for use such semantic constructions as "former home" and "the home back there," thus indicating the distance of this home in the spatial and temporal continuum, as well as the complexity and multiplicity of the concept of home. We then go on to describe the relationships our informants have with this "home back home" and attempt to reconstruct their notions of this "former" and "distant" home.

At first, the social connections and networks that bind the female migrants to home are quite strong. Contact with home is intensive and rich: they often call home and write letters; they regularly send or transfer money to family members, and visit them whenever the opportunity arises. As their "term of immigration" increases, with each new year spent away from the place they left for Petersburg, these ties weaken. Their moral and financial obligations to their relatives are significantly reduced or cancelled altogether. The female migrants act as the key contact persons: it is in their power to set the rules, to determine the form and regularity of contacts with their relatives back in the homeland, as well as to initiate or break such contacts.

Except during emergency situations such as the deaths of loved ones, our informants extremely rarely make trips home. These occur no more than once every year or two, during one- or two-week vacations. The places of origin of our migrants thus take on the significance of recreational zones, although even this aspect tends toward disappearance. Thus, in a situation of prolonged immigration, social networks and ties with their original communities are significantly weakened or even disrupted altogether. The boundaries of responsibility for relatives are redefined: care for one's extended family is often reduced to care for one's own children.

Despite a certain distancing and weakening of ties with their "former home," our informants evince an emotional attachment that manifests itself either in the form of nostalgic feelings for the past or utopian projects for the future. Sometimes in their conversations with us they recalled their lives before emigration with regret.

In our opinion, the nostalgic coloring in such narratives is probably evoked by longing for their previous—primarily stable—lives, but not for those places these women lived before emigration, for such stories are as a rule followed by descriptions of the current desolation or even ruination of their “previous” homes. The second form of emotional connection and attachment to the home “back home” is the “myth of return.” Nearly all our informants spoke with a great deal of doubt and uncertainty about a possible return “home”—“sometime,” “later,” “when I’ve earned enough money.” We assume that they foster this myth of return only as a possibility, as an alternative to their current lives. This alternative is probably significant only as an idea, not as a life project that they will work toward or seek out resources in order to realize. Much more often than nostalgic emotions, stories of their “former home” are organized around alarmist categories; the informants speak of total collapse back home, that there are no jobs there, or that life there is boring and there is nothing to do. We argue that this notion of the home “back home” is extremely vital for articulating their current selves.

To summarize, our research testifies to the female migrants’ gradual estrangement from and even break with their previous places of residence. The places they left are more important as a reference point: their current identities are formulated via a symbolic “rejection” of home. Perhaps the phenomenon of nostalgia and the return to utopia are only a question of time; perhaps someday the process of integration will not be so pressing for informants and they will feel the need for different identities, identities based on the value of otherness. Moreover, the fact that they identify the places they left as “home,” although they have no desire or intention to return there (at any rate, in the near future), demonstrates, in our view, that the very idea of home is of something in the past, something that has already become distant and not as real as it once was.

### **CONCLUSION: ‘HOME SWEET HOME’ FOR THE FEMALE MIGRANT AS POSTMODERN SUBJECT**

The concept of home as private space ceases to be relevant for women experiencing immigration. Privacy in the home is voluntarily “broken”: the women give up this privacy in order to integrate and become economically more effective. The principal virtues of home are proximity to work and cheapness. Like the migrants themselves, this home is not rooted: it is mobile and delocalized. It practically exists “in boxes” or, to be more precise, in the large checkered bags used by traders, for it is easily folded up and placed in these bags only to be taken out and unfolded again in a new place. This home is multiple in the sense that it is produced via the creation of a multitude of places where the female migrant feels “at home.” Home for female migrants is not bound up with long-term life perspectives and projects. Identifications with home as a place do not, as a rule, form amongst migrants, for they attempt to reject any limitations and attachments.

And yet home exists for the migrants. However, this home is other; it differs significantly from the customary idea of home as we understand it. The home of the

female migrants is “always with them,” not so much in trader’s bags, as in ideas. In this sense, the most stable home is language; for, as Pico Iyer has written, “If I have any deeper home, it is, I suppose, in [language]. My language is the house I carry around with me as a snail his shell.”

Our research shows that what characterizes migrants is a “non-attachment” to things and places, the capacity to manage space via deliberate practices and organized social networks within their urban environment. In the biographies of the women we have studied, we can read scenarios of individualization—emancipation from the social forms and stabilities characteristic of modernist society. A flexible reexamination of attachments, the capacity to move to a new place, and openness to new economic and social opportunities characterize postmodern subjects, which is what these female migrant laborers are. This postmodernist biographical scenario of the “independent woman” proved possible for them precisely in the situation of migration, a situation of apparent social vulnerability, resource scarcity, and unpredictability. Thus, in our view, the female migrant is an improbable but vivid example of the postmodernist nomadic subject.

*Authorized translation from the Russian by Thomas Campbell*