Space and Place

Bodily, geographic, and architectural sites are embedded with cultural knowledge and social value. The Anthropology of Space and Place series provides ethnographically rich analyses of the cultural organization and meanings of these sites of space, architecture, landscape, and places of the body. Contributions to this series will examine the symbolic meanings of space and place, the cultural and historical processes involved in their construction and contestation, and how they are in dialogue with wider political, religious, social, and economic institutions.

Volume 1
Berlin, Alexanderplatz: Transforming Place in a Unified Germany
Gisa Weszkalns

Volume 2
Cultural Diversity in Russian Cities: The Urban Landscape in the post-Soviet Era
Edited by Cordula Gdaniec

Cultural Diversity in Russian Cities
The Urban Landscape in the post-Soviet Era

Edited by
Cordula Gdaniec

Berghahn Books
New York • Oxford
CONTENTS

Figures vii
Preface and Acknowledgements ix

CHAPTER 1
Cultural Diversity between Staging and the Everyday – Experiences from Moscow, St. Petersburg and Other Russian Cities. An Introduction
Cordula Gdaniec 1

CHAPTER 2
Is Chinese Space ‘Chinese’? New Migrants in St. Petersburg
Megan L. Dixon 21

CHAPTER 3
Contructions of the ‘Other’ – Racialisation of Migrants in Moscow and Novosibirsk
Larisa Kosygina 50

CHAPTER 4
Reshaping Living Space – Concepts of Home Represented by Women Migrants Working in St. Petersburg
Olga Brednikova and Oliga Tkach 70

CHAPTER 5
African Communities in Moscow and St. Petersburg – Issues of Inclusion and Exclusion
Svetlana Boltovskaya 94

CHAPTER 6
The Construction of ‘Marginality’ and ‘Normality’ – In Search of a Collective Identity among Youth Cultural Scenes in Sochi
Irina Kosterina and Ulia Andreeva 115
Reshaping Living Space

Concepts of Home Represented by Women Migrants Working in St. Petersburg

OLGA BREDNIKOVA and OLGA TKACH

Introduction

The subject of this article was prompted by ‘misunderstandings’ occurring during conversations with our informants. While studying labour migrants in St. Petersburg who sell goods on the markets and shop pavilions, we often had to stand for hours on end beside the stalls where our informants worked. During interludes when there were no customers we talked to the migrants, and our topics of conversation ranged from their customers’ characters to their own housing problems, from the vagaries of weather to how it is to be a woman migrant. As is usual in conversation, our partners referred to their own experience, using phrases such as, ‘But where I’m from ...’ or ‘Where we’re from ...’ etc. It quickly transpired that the meaning of these apparently simple phrases was not always clear. They often required additional qualification - here, there, earlier, in my previous apartment, before moving to Petersburg, etc. A particular source of confusion were phrases such as ‘back home’, since the context did not always make it clear what was meant: Where do you mean by ‘home’? This question regularly cropped up in conversation and finally became the starting point of this study: Where is a migrant’s home, and what indeed constitutes home for a woman labour migrant?

When they change location, migrants do not just move from one place to another. They reshape their living space and significantly broaden the horizons of their own life. Contemporary migrants are now already defined as transmigrants, because they develop and support numerous family, economic, social, organisational, religious and political ties across borders (Glick Schiller, Bash, and Blanc-Szanton 1992: ix)¹. They inhabit a number of places simultaneously and belong to more than one society or community. Migrants’ social networks create special delocalised and diffuse social spaces. In these spaces, ideas of what home is change greatly: ‘home’ does not simply relocate with the migrant, or ‘multiply’, but changes its meanings.

Contemporary research on the phenomenon of ‘home’ comprises three basic directions or dimensions: 1) specific studies of physical space (housing, interior, material environment, etc.); 2) studies of people’s experience, the routine daily practices that define their being in a certain location as ‘being at home’; 3) reconstruction of different meanings attributed to ‘home’. Prior to the current age of global migration, researchers took ‘home’ to be synonymous with the house inhabited: a physically defined, restricted place. From the mid-1980s onwards, research on ‘home’ has focused mostly on conceptions about home and on social practices connecting identity with home. As Berger describes, for a world of travellers, of labour migrants, exiles and commuters, ‘home’ comes to be found in a routine set of practices, a repetition of habitual interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head. People are more at home nowadays, in short, in ‘words, jokes, opinions, gestures, actions, even the way one wears a hat’ (Berger 1984: 64 cited in Rapport and Dawson 1998: 7).

The existing literature on ‘home’ reveals an ongoing tension between definitions pertaining to physical places and those referring to symbolic spaces. ‘Home’ includes not only territorial attachment, but also adherence to transportable cultural ideas and values. It is not only national, cultural and social belongings, but also a sense of self, of one’s ‘identity’, which corresponds to various conceptualisations of home. Sometimes ‘home’ can be recognised in an abstract ideal, a longing for a nostalgic past or a utopian future (Al-Ali and Koser 2002: 7).

This study will follow our informants in understanding ‘home’ as a life space, or rather a localised, but nevertheless very mobile space of practices. This space is assigned the special symbolic status of being ‘one’s own’ - appropriated and privatised, comprehensible and safe, etc. Female migrants’ accounts distinguish between three overlapping levels or concepts of home:

1. Home as housing
2. Home as place of residence, in this case the city
3. Home as place of origin, or ‘homeland’

There is also the fourth, rather significant dimension of ‘home’, which combines and connects all three previous levels – 4. Home as a space of social ties.
Social Context of Labour Migration in Russia

This study focuses on female labour migrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union in St. Petersburg. Labour migration to Russia is now a widespread phenomenon. Its main sources are Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Labour migration on the territory of the former Soviet Union is caused by a combination of economic contrasts between former Soviet republics and the relative openness of borders between the new nation states. In addition, as our previous studies have shown, migrants often still perceive the territory of the former Soviet Union as ‘their own’ space, and interpret the conditions and rules of life across the territory as more or less uniform, thus predictable and understandable (Brednikova and Pachenkov 2002: 43–89).

Saint Petersburg is a Russian metropolis with a large need for migrant labour. However, official institutionalised channels of entering the labour market are still only poorly developed, and are subject to constant change. This legal uncertainty affecting labour migrants pushes them onto the informal labour market, with its restricted range of opportunities, low-paid and low-status work, usually not requiring professional skills and capacities. As numerous studies of migrant or ethnic economics show (e.g., Waldinger 1995), diverse forms of small-scale entrepreneurship constitute the traditional economic niche for migrants. In Petersburg, and many other Russian cities, labour migrants’ basic sphere of activities is on construction sites and in petty retail.¹

Labour migration to Russia is mostly individual male migration. This gender slant is connected mainly to traditional roles. The man is ‘responsible’ for his family, and thus compelled to take risks and take active steps to improve their economic situation. This makes migration an option. Sometimes an entire family emigrates, but usually women and children only move to a new location after the man has done so and found work there. According to the newspaper Inostranets (‘Foreigner’, 3.10.2004) in the first half of 2004, nine times more men than women arrived in Russia as migrant labourers. However, this statistic is not very reliable owing to the methodology employed, and it is certainly true that the number of female migrant workers employed in retail in St. Petersburg is considerable. They simply remain invisible to the authorities because they are not regarded as a threat to the security and stability of the host society. When checking registration documents, for instance, the police stop men far more often than women. With a few exceptions, female migrants also remain unnoticed by researchers, and most Russian publications on migration are gender-blind and implicitly focus exclusively on male migration.²

It is, however, precisely female labour migration that interests us. For women from the post-Soviet space, migration constitutes a radical experience of independence, in a certain sense even a spontaneous feminist project. Their biographical narratives and discourse on migration often contain motifs of liberation and gaining independence – freedom from tyranny in the family, financial freedom, or the freedom to take decisions for oneself (cf. Kosygin in this volume). Studies of how female migrants navigate and appropriate new places, of how they restructure the space of their life, and create a ‘new home’ and ‘new location’ are particularly interesting, since it is precisely women to whom traditionally an attachment to home is attributed. This attachment becomes problematic in the situation of migration.

Conceptualising the Migrant Home

Our study followed the qualitative sociological approach of participant observation and included a series of in-depth interview-conversations.³ Our main informants were five women who had moved to Petersburg from post-Soviet republics as migrant workers. They were women between thirty and fifty-five years old, employed in the retail sector as vendors by so-called ‘owners’ of the stands on the markets and retail centres. They had all been working here for at least five years (see Appendix for details).

As a rule, we looked for informants on the food markets and shop pavilions located near metro stations.⁴ The market atmosphere and spatial structure (constant flow of shoppers, high counters, closed kiosks) unfortunately made it difficult to form close acquaintanceships with vendors and to conduct lengthy conversations. It became much easier to form acquaintanceships when we assumed the role of regular customers, to whom vendors grew used and whom they came to trust. This enabled us to gradually form friendly and frank relationships with them. However, the basic problem was that in the course of a 10–14 hour working day, our informants had almost no time to meet us outside the market. These factors determined the form of the investigation – frequent informal meetings and chats with female migrants at their workplace, subsequently recorded in field diaries. Conversation usually occurred in interludes when vendors were not occupied with customers.

Besides conversation, we also gathered information through observation – for instance, of the market’s spatial structure, the rules of interacting with the neighbouring stalls, with customers and with the owners of booths and our informants’ employees. Whenever possible, we also visited our informants at home. Unfortunately there was little opportunity for this. Our
informants' lengthy and uninterrupted working hours, with only a couple of days free each month on 'sanitary days' (санитарные дни), meant that for a long time it was not possible to visit them at home. But the way such visits were postponed was informative. They led up to our visits by telling us about their home and about the places they frequented in the city. The way they justified not inviting us home revealed significant practices and motifs that contributed to the constitution of domestic private space (such as cleaning the rooms or due to the apartment's owner etc.).

**Housing and 'Home'**

Two factors shape the idea of the migrant's home as housing: instability (frequent moves of apartment or rooms), and lengthy working hours meaning little time is spent at home. Prior to moving to Petersburg, our informants had their own accommodation – an apartment or village house. Past feelings of ownership ('there, everything was ours') and independence ('there were no bosses there and we lived as we wanted'), in conjunction with domesticity, form their conception of 'the ideal home' that they remember, talk about with enjoyment and in great detail, even mentioning such details as the colour of the wallpaper. When talking to us, informants' tales of their previous homes were often painted in nostalgic colours. However, that home was lost in the past, and in the new circumstances, the ideal was unattainable. The new life dictated new demands and new relations regarding private domestic space, and new practices of organisation of everyday life and arranging living space.

None of our informants, despite their lengthy period as migrants, having moved to Petersburg not less than five years previously, have sufficient means to buy housing. Women (whether alone or with families) rent rooms in hostels, in communal apartments or self-contained apartments, together with other newcomers. Almost all our informants had moved apartment multiple times during their years in Petersburg. Initially, rented accommodation serves only the purpose of a 'roof over one's head' and the only criterion is the lowest possible rent. Usually, these are rooms and apartments let only to immigrant workers. As a rule, the apartments' owners are 'marginal elements' who have no regard for basic comforts or hygiene. The women told us of atrocious living conditions under the plumbing did not work at home and up to ten people might inhabit the same room, and every free square centimetre was filled with market goods such as vegetables, greens, etc. However, subsequent moves and relocations were only partly motivated by the desire to improve living conditions and/or gain some domestic space. Informants, rather, told us how they moved to be 'nearer to their place of work'; and the problems of overcrowding or dirt were 'only secondary.' The search for acceptable housing was made more difficult by the lack of official registration and of economic and social capital. For instance, Veronika and her husband and two children live together in a twelve-square-metre room in an eleven-room apartment, where thirty people use one bathroom. This said, in their accounts of accommodation, we almost never heard complaints about their housing problems. They told us more about the positive aspects of their accommodation and of the means they employed to overcome difficulties, such as washing laundry in an apartment without bath etc.

Initially, they took little pains to make themselves at home in their living quarters: The only things they brought with them were clothes, and the only furniture was that provided by the owner. Women do not strive to make their accommodation homely, since they regard it more as simply 'a roof over their heads', a place to sleep, and gather strength for work. For example, one of them told us of her work schedule and consequent relationship to her home:
There's nothing at all in the apartment, not even furniture. There's somewhere to sleep, and hot water — and that's enough. We get home at midnight, take a bite to eat and then sleep. (Tamara)

Even where there is a degree of stability, such as staying at the same place for a sustained period of time, they basically take no measures to furnish or do up their accommodation. Migrants moving to a new location to earn money prefer to minimise expenditure on doing up their living quarters. For instance, furniture is usually provided for free by the owner of the room or apartment, of from neighbours in a communal flat, or employers. The women do not try to 'put down roots', to make themselves at home in yet another apartment. They leave themselves a space of mobility, and the option of easily moving on, by 'living out of a suitcase', ready to move at any time. They avoid accumulating old and superfluous things, and also avoid buying bulky and expensive articles and domestic appliances (furniture or fridges, washing machines, etc). The only exception here is perhaps TV or audio equipment. Watching an evening TV series is the only form of recreation mentioned by our informants.

Any efforts to make their accommodation more homely are usually motivated by the presence of children in the family. All long-term planning of everyday life is connected with them: redecoration of a rented apartment, purchase of furniture, cooking of food to last a number of days and even, when absolutely necessary, searching for more comfortable housing. When they do up their homes, it is to provide a bare minimum of comfort for their children — for play and for doing their homework. Rubina lives together with her husband and two school-age sons in a small room in a hostel. During the seven years she has stayed in Petersburg, she purchased one single piece of furniture, to make things more comfortable for her children:

To start with, we slept on the floor a long time, then I bought a couch for the children that cost 11,000 roubles [approx. 300 Euros]. (...) Children need things to be as they should be, and I also bought them bed clothes. (Rubina)

The domestic space of the migrant's home does not constitute a 'mirror of identity'. In our informants' homes, everything has been acquired 'by chance'. They are purely functional, and not intended to match with any concept of an interior. Here there are virtually no superfluous objects or useless souvenirs that accumulate over the years and reveal something about the owners' personalities. About the only marker of identity in the homes of women migrant workers are the photographs that our informants were keen to show us. Revealingly, the story told by such photos is the 'story of a working woman'. Most of the photos are of the workplace and colleagues from the stalls, and not of any domestic interiors.

Domestic comfort and recreation rarely constitute a topic of discussion for the women themselves. Our informants aim to attain economic self-sufficiency and to have enough money for their children. As such, they are factually excluded from possessing private space as assiduous housewives. They do not create, they only use this space. It is only significant as a temporary space for briefly relaxing before the next working day begins.

I get very tired, like a zombie, I can't see or hear anything any more. If I could be at home, I would go to bed. (Rubina)

In their efforts to avoid spending money, women seize every opportunity to work, neglecting domestic activities, relaxation and spending time with their children. On public holidays — official time off for the rest of the city — their work is particularly long and arduous, since on these days selling food, flowers and cheap clothing is particularly profitable. Their rare days off on 'sanitary days' are also cleaning days at home, when the women do the washing, housework and cooking. A number of studies have shown that 'home' becomes synonymous with cuisine for migrants. However, for these women migrants, cuisine is not very important. They initially retain a fondness for 'ethnic cooking'. For instance, the migrant from Moldova told us how in the beginning she and her husband went to the station to meet the trains from Moldova and buy Moldovan wine from the conductors. However, gradually, traditional dishes are reserved more and more for special occasions, and replaced by snacks and quickly cooked meals. National cuisine remains a cultural marker to impress the neighbours — a special 'exotic' resource used to build networks and make contracts:

When we had just moved in to this apartment, I cooked mămăligă from corn. All the neighbours came to taste it. (Veronika)

Those people [from among the neighbours in a communal apartment] cook who have more time, and we eat together. We cook what we have. We fry the potatoes, and fry the meat. I don't have time any more for satsvi. We eat what we have. At the start we cooked Georgian food, but now it depends. We cook Georgian food when we all gather together. (Tamara)

Our informants' lack of any spare time allows them to rewrite the traditional gender roles whereby the woman is responsible for domestic chores and raising the children. These tasks are shifted to the man, thus reversing the traditional gender order. A migrant from Azerbaijan told us that
My husband does not work, but stays at home. I have two sons – I think it’s right that he takes care of them, there’s all sorts of problems – drugs, etc. You can’t let them go out alone before they’re eighteen. My husband cooks. He’s like a housewife. (Rubina)

Our informant in this case strategically planned the family structure most suitable for her: In taking on the ‘male’ role of provider, she still left it to her husband to teach her sons behaviour appropriate to ‘a man’. Her economic self-sufficiency allowed her to question ethnic gender codes, and to revise the distribution of authority in the family.

A: Actually, where I’m from [in Azerbaijan], it’s customary to fear your husband. My brother’s wife fears him.

Q: And do you fear your husband?

A: That would be the day! Why should I be afraid of him, I’m the one earning money. If I wasn’t earning money, I suppose I might pretend to fear him. (Rubina)

This study’s result show that, even where the husband is responsible for domestic chores and raising the children, women migrants still have to exercise control and management over these spheres, and sometimes bear the double burden of providing materially for the family as well as housework and childcare. For instance, when we visited one of our informants, we witnessed her asking her husband to hang up the washing from the machine. But he could not carry out her request, since he did not know how to open the washing machine. As a result, our acquaintance had to hang up the washing herself.

One further feature of the migrant’s home is, according to our observations, its relative openness. In homes we visited, we had the impression that the private sphere overflows from out of the room into its surroundings, as if it cannot be contained within the room’s perimeters. Whenever the situation allows, the doors are thrown wide and stay open. washing is dried in the apartment’s communal space or in the hostel’s corridors, feast days are open ‘to all comers’ in the communal kitchen, and shashliks (lamb kabobs) are barbecued in the courtyard. Something like a privatisation and domestication of public space takes place. Here, ‘home’ is just as open and accessible – guests are invited in, the private sphere is permeable and ‘transparent’, and things that might be kept secret are revealed (for instance, neighbours learn not only about what the family eats and buys, but also the relationships among family members). Obviously, such a relationship between private and public is the result of a number of factors – a very real shortage of room; the habitation of villagers such as our informants, where such behaviour is perfectly normal; and the exigencies of communal living in terms of cooperation and thus openness. Doubtless the openness of ‘home’ is also connected with a feeling of security. The negative experience of encounters with authorities due to the lack of formalised status, or intolerance exhibited on the part of Petersburg habitants, results in the doors of the ‘home’ being closed. For instance, we attribute the consistent reluctance to invite us to their home in the room of a dormitory (Rubina) to an insurmountable distrust towards new acquaintances we could not overcome.

The City as ‘Home’

Generally, women migrant workers move to Petersburg from small settlements, and they learn about life in a large city here, in the already extreme situation of being an immigrant. The encounter with city life, orientation in and appropriation of the new space starts for almost all women migrant workers with their new place of work, the marketplace.

My move to Petersburg was a gamble. I had no acquaintances here. I arrived, and immediately set off for Sennaya Ploschad [Haymarket], and that same day I found my first job, working for Tajiks. I started work. I lived in the railway station for the first week, and then managed to find an apartment. (Olya)

As described above, women migrant workers spend most of their time at work. This means that their workplace (stalls in markets, shop pavilions and booths) becomes their key point in space, their reference point in the space of the city, structuring and forming the remaining space and everyday life. This is where the city begins, and from where our informants start to familiarise themselves with and feel at home in the previously unknown territory. This said, usually only the space of the market and surrounding territory is particularly familiar to them. Our informants are largely uninterested in what lies beyond. In the mid 1990s, feminist geographers turned their attention to the fact that women usually look for work close to home, to facilitate their roles as carers for children and providers of domesticity (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997: 548–71). In our study, we see the reverse logic – the women make their homes close to their place of work. Women migrants often try to move nearer to their work. This strategy is chosen with the aim of avoiding loss of time and money moving around town. Apart from that, minimisation of the home-work-home journey, or more appropriately the work-home-work journey, is also connected with
their desire to lower the risk of encountering the police, who usually check documents and registration near to metro stations, and only occasionally raid the markets.

Women migrant workers change their place of work fairly easily. While remaining vendors, almost all our informants had regularly changed their places of work in favour of better conditions or better relations with the owners of the goods. They did so not just within the boundaries of one market, but between markets or retail centres. A change in place of work usually also entailed moving apartment, since the migrants tried to find accommodation close to their new work.

The area around where they live is of great interest to them. They can find all the infrastructure they need for everyday life on the market place. That is where they usually buy food and clothes. Migrants with children are more active in navigating the area round their house. In this case, women look for nurseries, schools and surgeries nearby. They hardly explore other areas of the city. Places of recreation are 'the stuff of dreams'. Our informants dream of going to the theatre, to a concert or the disco, for a massage, or even 'just to walk around the town' (Tamara). However, migrants' life follows different dictates, and leaves no time or energy for leisure. This means that for woman migrant workers, the city is predominantly their place of work and place of abode. Recreational Petersburg is, on the other hand, an imagined city, the city of tourist brochures and 'second-hand information'. One of our informants (Olya) extolled the great number of bridges in the city. But she already knew about them prior to her move to Petersburg, and their existence remained for her 'purely theoretical'; since during her five-year stay in Petersburg she had not once found the time to gaze upon them. The migrants' dominant image of the city still remains touristic:

When I travel back home, I'm even ashamed to have nothing to tell. I live in such a city and I have seen nothing and been nowhere. (Olya)

Thus the migrant woman's city is mainly structured around two objects - 'work' and 'home'. Other places practically do not feature. For instance, we heard the expression from one of our informants who was planning on going to a pop concert for the first time in many years, that she had no 'clothes for going out in' (Olya). Such an expression basically reflects a perception of the city as a bipolar space where there is 'work and home' and 'all the rest' where the latter is sometimes generalised as 'city'.

In our informants' image of the city, there is almost no centre and periphery, no official city districts or administrative boundaries. We are accustomed to viewing city space as a map, and employ categories such as north-south and official and informal names of city districts, and we fill out this map with significant objects, uniting it into one whole. Our informants structure the city somewhat differently, and they do it 'off the map', without using our general holistic picture. This is why initially their space seemed to us to be fragmented and even broken up, not able to be pieced together cohesively. It seemed to consist of discrete parts mostly because the women rarely move around the town. They hardly use any public transport apart from the metro: Express bus services are expensive, so only those are used that are vital for travelling between home and work or to nurseries or schools. Metro is the only means of transport used more universally, although only when strictly necessary. But underground journeys do not help migrants' perceptions knit the city together. Our informants' 'Pale of Settlement' is conditioned by the harsh demands of their working conditions and their economising, for they regard each journey as costing money and risking an encounter with the police.

However, it transpired that these women's perception of the city in fact did contain a unifying dimension. Frequently changing jobs and consequently frequently 'moving home', the women moved around the city in this way, gradually navigating and appropriating it. The 'house-work' link migrates and duplicates itself through the entire territory of the city, filling in the empty space with objects significant for the women. In this, their mental structure of the city turned out to correspond to the map of the metro. When talking about places in Petersburg, about their previous work or where their friends and relatives live, our informants described these places exclusively in terms of the nearest metro station: 'My father lives at “Prospekt Veteranov” (Rubina), or 'I used to work at “Ozerki” (Veronika), etc. Even where migrants do not use the metro as a means of transport, it figures significantly in the way they structure space. The metro creates a holistic image of the city and is used to divide the city into districts. Its stations constitute mini-centres around which the city's space clusters. If their place of work or of abode is at some distance from a station, they nevertheless refer to the nearest to describe the location. Obviously such way of structuring space is far from unique and many locals use the same method of conceiving and ordering the city's space. But for our informants, this is the only means employed. Perhaps the development of a more complex and multi-layered system of structuring the urban space could serve as index of the migrants' integration.

The issue of social segregation, of linkage between physical and social space, is usually expected to constitute a natural part of any discussion the place of immigrants in the city. In the case of Petersburg, however, it is still too early to talk of segregation. The status of districts and the housing market are still in flux. Segregation processes in the city are to be found more on the level of blocks, houses and floors, rather than districts or neigh-
bourhoods. A more common phenomenon is segregation between housing that looks out onto the street (front of house) and housing that looks out onto courtyards, with the former being considered much superior. Indeed, we can only talk of segregational tendencies. As described above, migrants prefer to settle in close proximity to their place of work – i.e., near the markets. They club together to rent cheap rooms and apartments in the cheapest and more downmarket areas, where no renovation has taken place and communal apartments still exist. Obviously, this strategy contributes to the formation of a certain type of social space. However, the scale of such segregation is still limited and not immediately apparent. In such districts, neighbouring blocks, neighbouring houses and neighbouring apartments can have different statuses and different states of repair. Our informants say that they do not feel any sense of belonging to such districts, any sense of being at ease and in safety. The women said that they could easily, and without any regrets, move to a new location in the case of ‘career success’ – that is, in the event that they found a more stable and lucrative job, and correspondingly, more comfortable living quarters.

Despite the fact that, according to the female migrant workers, there are no city districts ‘where they belong,’ almost all of them say that they feel relatively at ease in Petersburg. In the words of A. Bikbov, ‘on arrival in a strange city, or better, when navigating a differently structured space, there are many occasions for surprise, ecstasy and shock’ (Bikbov 2002: 3). However, not one of our informants, all of whom previously lived in small towns or villages, remembered having such feelings. Migrants also denied experiencing any fear of the large and unknown city. For one, from their point of view, the city does not even seem that big.

Q: Did you need a lot of time to get used to the city when you arrived?

A: Why did I need to get used to it? As soon as I arrived, I found work, and also accommodation at work. I don’t travel around the city. (Rubina)

Secondly, the women do not perceive their relocation as constituting migration to a different state and a change of citizenship. Petersburg is, just as in Soviet times, not perceived as being in any way a part of a foreign country. Russia ‘is not Italy or ‘Turkey’, where many of their relatives and acquaintances live.

The Soviet Union might have collapsed, but you still feel yourself at home here. I am not afraid of anything here and can walk the streets safely until two in the morning if I want to. (Tamara)

Fig. 4.2: Veronika at her former work place, a small kiosk selling alcohol and cigarettes. Photograph of the informant, 2002.
Only once did an informant tell us of being afraid in connection with Petersburg. But this fear was not for herself, but for her children. Growth of xenophobia in Petersburg, availability of drugs and the general criminal situation in the city all comprise sources of danger (Rubina). We regard this fear not as being afraid of the city, but of general worry about the well-being and safety of the children.

Thus, the city as a localised place of practices in one way or another becomes ‘home’ for woman, for it is a habitable and safe space, ‘their’ space. For all the apparent localisation and restrictedness of their lives, our informants enjoy ease of movement around the city, they change place of work and abode, and do not get tied to one neighbourhood or district. Their conceptions of urban space fit perfectly with the idea of the modern city that has neither ends, nor a centre, nor demarcated districts. It is rather an alloy of often disassociated processes and social heterogeneity, a place where far and near intermingle, a succession of different rhythms, a place constantly spilling out in new directions (Amin and Thrift 2002).

The Homeland Is Where the Home Is

In accordance with our analytical conception of the broadening space of the ‘home’ (housing – address – place of origin) based on our informants’ own conceptions, we will here examine the conception of home as homeland. It should be noted that the word ‘homeland’ (in Russian, rodina), used in the title of this chapter, was almost never used in conversation with our informants. It is a category of elevated or official discourse, and as such not used by the migrants. Their relationship to their places of origin is more prosaic, down-to-earth and lacking any pathos and patriotic overtones. But we decided to use it because the Russian language has difficulties naming this place. The word ‘homeland’ is privatised by elevated discourse, and ‘place of origins’ – by administrative discourse. Quotidian discourse knows only the word ‘home’. In this sense, when analysing the concept of our migrants’ home, we should have started with homeland, place of departure, because this is what the women most frequently refer to as ‘home.’ However, since we started with the idea of home as a space of localised, routinised practices, place of origins is what least likely is to be understood as ‘home’.

Women migrant workers’ reasons for migration are predominantly economic. Migrants emigrated to earn money and provide financial support for their families – children and/or husband, parents, sometimes brothers and sisters. To start with, migrants’ social ties and networks with the society they have left behind remain very strong. These links are very intensive and active: migrants often phone home, write letters, pass on or send money, and visit their family whenever possible. As the duration of migra-

tion increases, with every year spent in St. Petersburg, these links weaken. The situation of migration and the distance from people with whom they used to live, forces a redefinition of the zone and degree of responsibility. As soon as possible (when there is some certainty in terms of work and housing), women migrants’ children move to live with them in Petersburg. Other ties and moral and economic obligations to relatives, grow significantly weaker, or disappear altogether.

I don’t understand why I should pay for a flat when I don’t live there. OK, my elderly mother lives there. But she has other children apart from me. Let them help her now! I have to live at least a bit for myself. (Olya)

Nevertheless, migrants still nurture ties with the homeland. According to informants’ accounts, they are the ones to initiate contact to relatives. Obviously the reverse is made more difficult by the frequent moves of our informants, resulting in frequent changes of address, whereas addresses and telephone numbers of those in the place of origins are less likely to change. In this way, it is the migrant women who are the key to staying in touch, and they dictate the rules: the form and frequency of such relations, and whether to initiate or break such ties in the first place. They use telephone to maintain their ties to close relatives or friends left in the homeland, since it is the most accessible and direct form of monitoring and controlling the situation with their relatives.

I phone home every evening. I hear that the children are asleep and you know that everything is OK. (Tamara)

Apart from exceptional situations, such as the death of a close relative or friend, return visits to the homeland are very rare. As a rule, they don’t happen more than once every one or two years and are made during a week or two of holidays. Such trips are usually for rest and recreation. Polya sends her children home during the holidays and occasionally travels with them as well. In this way, the place of origin becomes more a zone of recreation. However, this also starts to fade:

I travel home in the summer for two weeks to rest, but I immediately die of boredom there! There’s nothing to do. Next year, if I get the money and a visa, I’ll go to Bulgaria with a friend. (Olya)

Nevertheless, it is possible to talk of a sort of emotional bond to the homeland that manifests itself either in the form of nostalgic reminiscences of the past, or utopian projects of the future. In the course of our conversation
with them, the women sometimes reminisced about the past, about their lives before their emigration, with regret. Veronika, for instance, told us with a note of sadness how she missed her wooden house in Moldova. According to our observations, such nostalgic touches are usually connected with their past life, but not with the actual place they used to live.

The second form of emotional bond to the homeland is the 'myth of return'. Almost our all informants told us of their prospective move back with a large degree of doubt. We think it likely that such a myth of return is necessary to leave oneself a potential alternative to the current life. The theme of return is important more as an idea, but not as a project that they will work towards. Narratives and memories about the previous place of abode are extremely important as a point of reference for 'updating oneself'. The homeland becomes a point of departure for one's own career and development. Moreover, it is a place of confirmation of one's own success. Nostalgic longings are much less frequent as narratives of the homeland than are alarmist categories of collapse and ruin, unemployment or of boredom and nothing to do. In this way, in narratives about the place of origins, there is a distance between 'yesterday' and 'today', a break with the society they have left behind and a closer bond to the host society. However difficult life might be in Petersburg, to go back home would be interpreted as defeat. Such narratives reflect especially long-term life projects connected with Petersburg.

Thus our study shows migrants' gradual detachment from and even break with their place of origins. The homeland is more important as a point of reference, as the framework for the formation of today's identity. The fact of naming the place of origin 'home', in our view, in many ways demonstrates the very idea of home as past, superseded, having become distant and not very relevant.

'Home' as a Space of Social Ties

In constructing the concept of the migrants' home, social ties play a very important role. 'There they are all our friends' – Rubina said once about the shop pavilion where she worked. This important category reflects migrants' concepts of a stable and safe space where everything is comprehensible and predictable. 'One's own' space is sometimes itself accorded the status of 'home'.

On the market we congratulate each other when there is occasion, and celebrate birthdays as if it was our home... (Olya)

Taking into account the meaning of social ties in the construction of 'one's own' space, we decided to dedicate a section to analysing the structure of the women migrant workers as agents and social relationships between them.

Despite their relatively brief period of living in Petersburg, our informants are involved in a large number of interactions and networks. A telling manifestation of this is the large number of names mentioned and listed in almost every narrative or conversation with us on any topic, whether it was a discussion of work initiated by us or just 'something that happened'. It is not just names that were mentioned, but also the exact link – who they were and what the relationship was. Whole stories grew up around these names, such as the history of the acquaintance, of recent dealings, etc. The frequent mention of other people involved in the migrants' lives marks not only their extended and intensive social network, but also its great significance for them.

Who is involved in these networks? Our informants were originally the initiators of their own move to Petersburg and established themselves in the city by themselves, 'gathering' or even 'earning' networks. Relatives and people from their area, having settled in the city long before their arrival, become an important, but not a crucial resource when setting oneself up in a new place, and looking for work and accommodation. Veronika told us that her mother some years previously also came to work in Russia, and works in both Moscow and Petersburg. However, they have almost no contact to each other, since both changed address so often they finally lost each other. In this way, they chose individual life strategies, independent of each other and without affording mutual assistance. As previous studies showed, in migrants' lives, emerging social networks are not informed by shared ethnicity or kinship, they are instrumental and contextual. Ties that emerge at the place of migration, among the people in the migrants' immediate vicinity, do more for them and are more in demand (Brednikova and Pachenkov 2002: 74–81).

The main places where social ties are formed are the workplace and place of abode. The chief participants in migrants' social networks are colleagues, employers, customers and even landlords and neighbours. The women often describe their relationships with their environments in categories of kinship, emotional nearness and selfless mutual assistance.

I've lived here three years, and I've never had an argument with Marina [the neighbour], I get on with her better than with a sister. (Veronika)

Apart from emotional support, networks also fulfil other important functions, such as integration in the host society. Networks circulate important
information, exchange resources and services, etc. For example, networks help find living accommodations or work. Landlords give our informants furniture and clothes, neighbours share their domestic appliances and colleagues from the market, renting rooms in the same apartment, take on some of the housework, contribute money to the shared kitty, etc. In return, migrants can offer to keep an eye on the apartment, or offer vegetables from the market, they lend money, and help about the house, etc.

As our observations showed, women constantly work on the establishment and reproduction of social ties and networks, creating a body of reliable and mutually profitable interactions. Thus, after our acquaintance, it was our informants who became the initiators of meeting. They called us periodically, enquired how life was and told us about theirs, offered to meet, etc. Initially, on arriving in a new social environment, migrants have little social capital, so their work on creating social ties is purposeful and demands considerable effort and application.

Networking not only involves communicating. Our study showed the great importance of their work in creating and supporting professional and personal (moral) reputation. Women choose the behavioural strategy ‘be good (kind, good-humoured) to everyone’ – police, customers, employers, neighbours, etc. This emotional work helps them to ‘domesticate’ social space, to make it ‘their own’, lending life in the city and at home a degree of stability. To establish ‘effective’, i.e., instrumental and convenient relations with the men our informants depend on (employers, neighbours etc.), they employ ‘womanly strategies’ of flirting and coquettishness that allow them to balance between sexual and amicable relations and ultimately forming a circle of ‘their own’, ‘trusted’ men, on whom they can rely in case of difficulties. Frequently, women enter into relationships with men that could be called a contractual sexual partnership, when the partners are economically independent of each other, emotional entanglement is kept to a minimum, but there is mutual support and assistance.

Thus, personal reputation for migrants constitutes valuable capital that brings in regular returns. During field work, we often heard stories about how much the women’s efforts to create a positive impression of themselves (‘I smile at everyone’) ‘were working’. For instance, during the celebration of Petersburg’s 300th anniversary, the police did not evict the family of one of them from the city as illegal immigrants, because the officer had a good relationship to them. Another found accommodation thanks to a customer, who recommended her as being clean and tidy; an estate agent who is the regular customer of a third migrant is now helping her find accommodation. The women love to tell stories of how customers came back to them to say how they liked their service, and how former employers phone them and offer them work, etc. ‘Regular customers’ are important participants in migrants’ social networks. In contrast to ties to colleagues who are mostly also migrants, ties to customers are more effective in terms of integration. Such networks help find accommodation, get information about the city, etc. They attract regular customers by lowering prices, choosing the best goods. When talking to vendors at booths, we noticed that regular customers arrived at about 1 o’clock. Usually the women drew our attention to it, showing how they are appreciated by the locals around them, who regard them as ‘their own’. Initially, we posed as regular customers for our informants, and it was precisely the openness and interest of our informants, their desire to chat to us that made it quite easy for us to get to know them and subsequently carry out our fieldwork.

In this way, strategic deployment of emotions and the ‘commodification of feelings’ become an important component of our acquaintances’ economic activity and their quotidian communication, becoming a usual and even routine practice.11

I always try to smile... Everyone remembers me and says hello, even the shop vendors. My customers always come back. Recently I fell ill, and one woman came and refused to buy clothes from my replacement, saying she would wait until I was back. (Veronika)

**Conclusion**

Thus the concept of home as a private space for women migrants ceases to be relevant. Their ‘home’ is mobile, situative and not linked to long-term perspectives and projects. Privacy breaks down and is rejected in favour of integration and economic efficiency and well-being. Under such conditions, ‘home’ does not denote stability and safety but functionality and convenience (cheapness, proximity to work, presence of ‘one’s own’ circle of associates). Such a ‘home’ is not for returning to but for leaving. It is not where one stays after giving birth, and it is not where one ‘spends time’ etc. The ‘home’ of women labour migrants gradually broadens out spatially; its borders become unclear and are in constant flux.

For researchers of today’s society of individuals, this flexible perception of space and place devalues the middle-class ‘my home is my castle’ ethos and actively opposes mobility to sedentariness (Bauman 2001: 35) – where the latter is the index of powerlessness and subordination, and the former the main index of privilege (Bauman: 49). The capacity to flexibly reconfigure and change one’s life, to divest oneself of long-term attachments to things, to create flexible social ties and solidarity, mobility and ease in acquiring the rules of interaction – all these are key factors of contemporary
social stratification, where at the top of the pyramid are those ‘building’ their homes by precisely these rules.

Research ascribes all these modalities to the privileged classes, the professional and political elites, whose representatives are equipped with laptops, ubiquitous Internet access, diverse means of transport and significant financial resources, allowing them to devalue space, ‘play’ with space and time, and enjoy ‘freedom of relocation’. Migrants, on the other hand, are victimised. As a rule, they are attributed the role of ‘flurrying to find a place to survive’ (Bauman: 38). Our study shows that a lack of attachments to places and things is just as typical for migrants ‘positioning themselves’ in a network of possibilities rather than paralyzing oneself in one particular job (Bauman: 39). They dwell in space; however, they are not tied tightly to physical space, but control it through strategic practices and social networks they establish in their urban environment.

The women’s biographies reveal scenarios of individualisation – liberation from certain social forms and certainties characteristic of modern societies. They subject the ‘traditional’ institutions of family and marriage to review, and form a family of convenience that dissolves on becoming inconvenient. Our informants also manage to free themselves from profession and company, decentralise the place of work (Beck 2000).

Planning, flexible rethinking of ties and change of location, openness to new economic and social opportunities characterise the behaviour of the post-modern subjects that include labour migrants. This post-modern biographical scenario of the ‘independent woman’ becomes possible for them precisely in the situation of migration, which would seem marked by social vulnerability, lack of resources and uncertainty. In this way, women labour migrants constitute an unexpectedly vivid example of the post-modern nomadic subject.

**Appendix: Informants**

Veronika: From Moldova, thirty years old, has lived in St. Petersburg for five years, married with two children (eleven and three respectively), rents a room in a communal flat of eleven rooms, lives with husband and children. She sold vegetables on the Sytnyi market for a long period of time – and then in a booth by a metro station. For a period of some months she sold clothes at Apraksin Dvor – the largest clothes market of the city. Now she is working as dish-washer in a cheap café.

Polya: From Ukraine, has lived in St. Petersburg for ten years; thirty-five years old, divorced, two children (sixteen and thirteen respectively), sells vegetables in a booth by a metro station. She lives with her son, the elder daughter recently returned to Ukraine. Rents a two-room flat together with a Ukrainian friend who also lives with her son.

Tamara: From Georgia, eleven years in St. Petersburg; fifty to fifty-five years old, widow, two sons (thirty and seventeen years old respectively, who live in Georgia with the informant’s mother) sells flowers at a metro station stall. Practices shuttle migration – lives three to four months alternatively in Georgia and in Petersburg. Works alongside her niece, a student. She currently rents a room in a three-room flat which she shares with her niece and her niece’s mother.

Rubina: From Azerbajian, nine years in St. Petersburg; approx. forty years old, married, two sons (thirteen and fourteen years old), sells vegetables in a booth by the metro, rents a room in a hostel, lives with husband and children.


From the Russian by Graham Stack.

**Notes**

1. However, 15 January 2007, when we had finished the fieldwork for this story, a new migration law was passed that barred foreigners from working in petty retail. These changes are significantly altering the situation portrayed here. Now former migrant vendors lacking Russia citizenship either have to change their type of work, or find some loophole in the law, find some way of getting citizenship, or break the law.


4. Shop pavilions adjacent to metro stations are roofed retail clusters containing small booths and boutiques selling cheap foodstuffs. People make purchases there on the way to or from work. Such pavilions are a more structured and controllable form of the informal market places that cropped up beside metro stations. Nevertheless, such pavilions are, after the major city markets, the largest employer of women migrants. (For a map of central St. Petersburg see fig. 2.2.)
5. 'Sanitary day' is, as a rule, the only day in the month when markets or shop pavilions close to allow full-scale cleaning work.

6. Our informants prefer to support their children financially over emotionally or physically. Veronika, for instance, went back to work only two months after giving birth to her second child. Rubina, when she goes to work, 'used to leave my sons at home by themselves, they were six to seven years old, and they cried all day so the neighbours heard, but I had to go to work.'


8. Type of kasha or porridge.


10. For young women, without a family, the reason for migration might also be individual interests (not family-linked). In such a case, migration is permanent from the very beginning, and there is no shuttling to and from. However, this study does not examine such cases.


REFERENCES


Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. and E. Avila. "I'm Here, but I'm There": The Meanings of Transnational Motherhood, Gender and Society 11, no. 5 (1997): 548–71.
