

(Non-)Return: Can Migrants Become Former Migrants?

Ol'ga E. Brednikova

To cite this article: Ol'ga E. Brednikova (2017) (Non-)Return: Can Migrants Become Former Migrants?, *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, 56:3-4, 298-320, DOI: [10.1080/10611959.2017.1450549](https://doi.org/10.1080/10611959.2017.1450549)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611959.2017.1450549>



Published online: 25 May 2018.



Submit your article to this journal 



Article views: 23



View related articles 



View Crossmark data 



OL'GA E. BREDNIKOVA

(Non-)Return: Can Migrants Become Former Migrants?

The return of migrants home is problematic because it manifests important gaps at the social, identificational, and everyday levels. The social gaps are caused by forced restructuring of social networks. Breaks at the identificational level are associated with acquisition of the migrant's unique experience of being "out", with the transnational multiplication of social reality, as well as with the production of distance from the host community. Breaks at the level of everyday life are embodied in the assimilation of new social practices and corporeal idioms. The study of the phenomenon of return through the transnational, biographical, and identificational lenses seems informative and nonobvious. The analysis of migrants' emotions, perceptions of the past and the future (in particular, the phenomenon of nostalgia and myth of the return), as well as everyday practices and their physical incarnations provides rich material for the interpretation of the phenomenon.

Keywords: *phenomenon of return, biographical perspective, transnational perspective, identificational perspective, Central Asian migrants*

English translation © 2017 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, from the Russian text © 2017 “Etnograficheskoe obozrenie.” “(Ne)vozvrashchenie: Mogut li migrancy stat’ byvshimi?” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 2017, no. 3, pp. 1–16.

Ol'ga Evgen'evna Brednikova (<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6954-1273>; bred8@yandex.ru) is a leading research fellow with the Centre for Independent Social Research, 87 Ligovsky Prospect, St. Petersburg, 191040, Russia.

This research was supported by the following institutions and grants: Russian Science Foundation, <https://doi.org/10.13039/501100006769> [grant no. 14-18-02149].

Translated by Stephan Lang.

For a long time, the Nevskii Prospekt metro station in St. Petersburg was adorned by an airline advertisement depicting a large airplane in the background behind tiny people in stylized Central Asian clothing: multicolored dresses, trousers, robes, and skullcaps. What was most noteworthy in this advertisement was the tag line: passengers were promised “Flights home and back.” To my view, the advertising agency’s creative director appeared to be a keen and discerning sociologist, encapsulating all the characteristics of contemporary migration with this phrase by capturing its processual and constant movement while problematizing the situation of returning. While in essence return always constituted home, arrival is a dynamic process enabling one to later leave for an amorphous “back.”

I address the questions that arise in the wake of the advertising slogan: when and why does “back” come into being? What keeps the migrant from stopping? Is there a return in this back-and-forth movement? What does it signify? I would like to discuss not so much the substance and ambiguity of returns, as the conceptual and methodological components of the phenomenon of return, about how it can be defined, what frames and research approaches may be useful in studying the given phenomenon.

The article is based on material obtained in the project “Transnational and translocal aspects of migration in contemporary Russia,” conducted under the auspices of the European University in St. Petersburg in 2014–16. The focus of the research was arrivals [*priezzhie*] from Central Asia who come to Russia (in this case to St. Petersburg) with the goal of earnings. The project’s methodology assumed gathering field material in the host country and the country of origin. We examined members of one family and household: those who remained at home and those who migrated. The research was longitudinal: for three years we observed people’s movements and the changes taking place. Nine families from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan participated. One of the obvious but important conclusions is that migrants, being mobile agents in accord with J. Urry’s conception (Urry 2012a, 2012b), are indeed very movable [*podvizhny*]. Over the research period, my informants changed places of work and spheres of occupation, spouses and partners, telephone numbers and addresses of residence, and more. Thus they were constantly devising new plans and ways to realize them: migrants would leave for home “for good,” but after some time they

would return to Petersburg only to again leave anew—for home or someplace further. And this movement did not cease.

The “mobility turn” in the social sciences, which has had an enormous influence on research into the migrations of recent decades, allows us to regard people’s relocations as a norm. According to the given paradigm, all of modern life is organized and structured by movement, both actual and potential (Sheller and Urry 2006, p. 212). Within the framework of this approach, any relocation of a person is regarded not as a turning point in that biography, but as the persistently movable state of individuals, constituting their everyday life. It is evident that for a mobile agent, return has its particular characteristics, associated with unique experiences gained in a situation of migration, while falling out from the ordinary flow of life of the community of origin. All this gives rise to *sui generis* discontinuities, which make return complicated or even impossible.

This article presents three perspectives analyzing the framework of the phenomenon of return: biographical, transnational, and identificational. These are unconditionally very “broad,” interconnected and even overlapping in some measure. However, I deemed it necessary to make these distinctions, for each perspective offers its own answers to the questions raised above and its own understanding of the phenomenon of return, permitting one to devote greater attention to analytical designs and frameworks. Obviously it is possible to make use of other approaches in the study of this problem. However, it is precisely these that open up new perspectives for interpretation, while the results obtained in using them may turn out to be counterintuitive and unexpected. The present work suggests directions for future research, as the questions being examined merit further elaboration.

I focus more on the reverse side of the phenomenon—on *nonreturn*—and conclude that the return of migrants home always requires reintegrating people who had formerly dropped/fallen out of their “native” society and its institutions (Arowolo, 2000). Indeed, return is factually impossible; you cannot put a period after it, only an ellipsis, because the migration can be resumed at any moment. As D. Ley and A. Kobayashi explained, in an era of transnationalism, return is not a completed project, but a continuously ongoing one (Ley and Kobayashi 2005, p. 111).

The Script Approach in Biographical Perspective¹

Migrations represent a particular biographical project, built into a person's overall life trajectory, having its own goals and logic of development. What interests me in the given situation is an approach whereby the life script represents a normalized and replicated trajectory.

The biographical perspective in research traces its history back to W. Thomas's and F. Znaniecki's widely known work about the life of Polish migrants in American society, which has long been a classic (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). Its further development in the 1980s is connected with the overall increase in the popularity of biographical research and, more broadly, with research based on qualitative methodology (for example, Breckner 2014). In such a perspective, migration is regarded in the context of one's entire lifetime and is connected with one's past and assumed future as a process that has neither a beginning nor an end. Its meaning is correlated with specific life phases and changes over the course of time (Breckner 2007, p. 118).^a

Research of migrants' biographies elucidates a broad spectrum of salient questions: how social networks work, in what manner people's fate takes shape in a situation of displacement beyond the confines of a region or country, how they are connected with the community of origin, how they fit into the life of host societies, how their identities change, and more. Experiences of nonreturn/return are in some way written into people's life trajectories, and study of the construction of biographies on different scales (at the "entire lifetime" level and the micro-level when researching an everyday perspective) allows the phenomenon to be analyzed.

The script approach performs the role of a heuristic tool for the description and analysis of life trajectories. Initially popular in gender research (for example Temkina 2002), it made its way into works devoted to migrations, for example in the work of Israeli sociologists on settlers from Russia and their integrational scripts (see Lerner, Rapoport, and Lomsky-Feder 2009). To take a cue from Julia Lerner, script is understood to mean a distinct schema of successive steps (Lerner, et al., 2007)—a kind of ideal model, dictating migrants' life strategies and everyday practices. It is even possible to regard the script as a metaphor—as a text and sequence of actions known to the actors, but with a certain improvisation. As I noted earlier, this is a *sui generis* replicated biography, which people reproduce in a situation of

migration. Unconditionally, though, the actions of a concrete person in concrete life conditions will vary.

Four main biographical scripts can be distinguished on the basis of our research: *immigrant*, *guest worker*, *adventure*, and one associated with “*repairing social status*.” In essence, these are Weberian ideal types, and in reality they are multinomial, interrelated, and can intersect, combine, or flow into one another. The given classification is based on an analysis of the roles that migrants play, and on a reconstruction of their life trajectories—including how they fill their time, how they build up support networks, what kind of integration strategy they choose, and more. Of course, other variants of systematization exist as well. In particular, scripts proposed by Sergei Abashin, built up on the basis of familial roles, appear interesting (Abashin, 2015). However, the classification proposed here is the most germane for analysis of the practices of “return.”

The Immigration Script

This can be considered the classic variant for persons oriented toward staying in the host society. Naturally, work comprises an important part of their life, but they do not avoid other activities. One can observe a gradual improvement in the immigrants’ housing conditions: they begin to build their own house, move the family, or create it at the new place. In such an event, ties with the motherland are reduced, while social contacts are not limited to expatriate compatriots [*zemliaki*] exclusively. Assumed within the framework of this script are active investments in integration: the language is learned, everyday patterns of behavior are adopted. In such a manner, immigrants build long-term plans associated with the place of current habitation. In these circumstances, return for them becomes more a myth, for actions in this direction are factually absent. (However, see the “Identificational Perspective” section for an analysis of return through mythologization and nostalgia for home.) It can be said that interaction with the expatriate compatriot community [*zemliachestvo*] goes in waves: initial use of such connections gives way to their rejection for better integration into the host society. A subsequent turn to them at a new level may later occur, as they are required to maintain ethnic identity when immigrants are sufficiently incorporated into the new life that they can elevate otherness [*inakovost’*] into a value.

The Guest Worker or Labor Script

This script unfolds primarily around migrants' labor activity. In this situation, the main goal of coming, to which one's entire life is subordinated, is to earn money for something concrete (e.g., to build a house, to buy a car, to pay for a wedding). Other spheres of activity are excluded or limited, put off "for later," leisure is practically absent. Strategies of such migrants are connected with the resources of the expatriate compatriot communities. In this script, people's social networks are utilitarian, they are not overly broad, and include primarily coethnic² expatriates or migrants from other countries. Guest workers are limited in movement; their use of urban surroundings is associated only with work. They do not build a house, their personal space is reduced to a "shuttle trader's" [*chelnochnoi*] plaid carrying bag, for the quantity of things is also minimized. In this respect, guest workers are not oriented toward active involvement in the host society. Although they are integrated into it to a certain degree, they learn the language to the extent required for work, and interaction with locals is not a priority. The rules of the community of origin turn out to be more significant and in demand in this situation.

In the realization of the given script, return is written into the biographical project, in which migration is assumed to have an end. However, a "trap" lies in the targeted approach. As practice shows, domestic needs multiply, one follows another. Thus, an initial aspiration to earn for a wedding gives way to a desire to build a house, to buy a car, to pay for an education for the children, and so forth. Over time, migrants' families grow, and needs grow correspondingly as well.

Q: Rakhmonbek, now what do you think, so when are you going to go home for good already?

A: Don't know. We'll see after we've built the house. Maybe we're going to need something else. I really still want a car.
(PMA 2: Rakhmonbek)

In this dialogue, despite the fundamental finiteness of migration as a temporary biographical project, long-term planning horizons can be read. And even if the person does return home "for good," new goals will move him into a new spiral of migration, for the given way of getting income is already mastered and familiar, while new

opportunities in the motherland are either not known or are absent in principle. What could serve as a good example, in my view, would be the unfinished construction that can often be seen in the Central Asian villages that residents leave on a mass scale for earnings. In one of the *kishlaks* [villages] in a Dushanbe suburb, we were invited into such an uncompleted house. It is noteworthy in that it represents a rather ambitious project—the construction of a huge three-story building. The migrant's family (a wife and two preschool-aged children) lives on the first floor; the two upper stories are empty concrete boxes. Showing us through the construction, the wife commented: "This is the second floor—2016, a year of the husband's work. This is the third floor, we'll do it in 2017. God willing, if the husband stays on in Moscow..." (PMA 2: Gulia). Such houses are in essence the embodiment of migrational biographical projects, where each stage of construction is planned in a long-term life perspective. But despite such concreteness, the date of its completion is unknown, while return is regularly put off.

The Adventure/Tourism Script

In the given variant, migrants play the role not only of guest workers (which refers back to the previous script to some extent), but also that of tourists and/or adventure seekers. Taking a cue from Georg Simmel, by adventure I understand a discontinuity in the everyday flow of life, a dropping out from the mundane (Zimmel' 1996).

As a rule, these scripts are realized by young people, not yet burdened with families, who migrate with the goal not only of earning, but also of gaining new impressions. In this case, within societies of origin this is becoming a mandatory stage in a normalized biography, a *sui generis* initiation, signifying coming-of-age. That being said, within the framework of the given script, life is not put off "until later"; it flows "here and now." The goal of such migration is not just to get income. Work does not occupy the central place in the life strategies of the "tourists." They not only work, but also find time for relaxation, cafés, shopping, outings, meetings with friends, parties, use of the Internet, and more. In the narratives of my informants, Petersburg has ample tourist and leisure attractions, far from mere places they once worked. Tourist-migrants seek new, unknown impressions, including sexual adventure:

Q: When you going home, Abror?

A: Don't know, I haven't seen just about anything here yet. I want to go to Peterhof, then there's the Crimson Sails, I've heard. And I haven't even had myself a Russian woman here either! I'll be staying around here for now... (PMA 1: Abror)

Support networks for them can be limited to coethnic expatriates with whom they spend most of their free time, and can include colleagues—as a rule, the same kind of migrants from former Soviet republics who have come to Petersburg, with whom one can both work and relax. Integration has its particular characteristics because of how the “tourists” actively adopt leisure practices prevalent among local inhabitants and assimilate new spaces. Being “out in public” more often, they borrow everyday rules of behavior and customs, leading to assimilation and appropriation of some patterns of the host culture. However segregational processes are also associated with the functioning and proliferation of migrant infrastructure, as we observe today in large Russian cities (Varshaver and Rocheva 2014).

The problem of non-return is most likely connected with the constant thirst for new impressions and adventures that accompanies migration. The emotional component of such a life project plays a vital role. And the search for the new in this case becomes more important than ties with home, which gradually break down. In addition, the migrants' withdrawal from mundane reality, their rejection of routine, seems important in principle—the tourist script furnishes such an opportunity in full measure. According to our research (Brednikova and Tkach 2010), the conception of home in the situation of migration changes seriously. Life in rented apartments and dormitories significantly alienates people from home: often people do not clean the premises, launder the bedding, or deal with routine repairs. Their personal space is limited to a bed-unit [*koiko-mestom*] and a shuttle trader's bag with the bare essentials.

In these circumstances, migrants are prepared to “pull up the stakes” and change their place of residence at any moment. One can say that they become emancipated, liberated from everyday household labor, enabling time for leisure. And while guest workers devote free hours to additional work and try to be at least virtually plugged into the needs of the family left in the motherland, then “tourists,” conversely, aspire to

amusements. What is important to them is the “here and now” life, which can only distance them from home.

As an extreme example of non-return, I cite the case of a 55-year-old migrant from Tajikistan—Saidullo. He has been in migration in Russia for more than fifteen years, working in different regions of the country, including Siberia, Yakutia [Sakha Republic], and Krasnodar Krai. For the past several years he has been living in Petersburg. The change of places is dictated not so much by rational choice as by his aspiration to find something new. Concealed behind the declared goal of seeking better conditions is the desire for movement for the sake of movement, which has been defining his actions for a long time. Saidullo describes in detail the places he has worked, since these themes are important for him. In such circumstances, his ties with family were destroyed a long time ago. First he got divorced from his wife, then he reduced interaction with his adult children to phone calls on holidays. Saidullo visits Tajikistan rarely and if needed stays at the home of a brother, usually not with his children.

Q: Saidullo, when are you planning to return?

A: Don't know. Only if I get sick. For now no, I'll be here. We'll see later. Now maybe I'll earn enough for a little house.... I don't really want to go to the children. Although they will take me in. They've got to take me in! That's the way it is in our culture—children have got to respect adults. (PMA 1: Saidullo)

Long-term planning is absent; he mentions merely the circumstances that, in his opinion, control his life.

The “Repairing Social Status” Script

In part, repairing social status intersects with the previous two scripts (especially with the guest worker script) in relation to organization of life, formation of social networks, or choice of integrational strategies, but has its own characteristics, associated with the goal and, correspondingly, with the practice of return.

As a rule, this is a variant of women's individual migration: in recent years its increase is being documented by researchers. Such a path is chosen by widows or divorced women with a “broken” marital status, who are trying to resolve their problems and earn enough to live on. At home they do not fit into the community, they are deprived of their

place. Migration gives them the opportunity either to restore status (via a new marriage) or take a break from resolving this issue. Although rare, in some situations this step allows a woman to accumulate funds for her own home, and then the “repairing” is connected with building autonomy from her parents and her husband’s family.

The story of the young Tajik woman Zebuniso, who got divorced from her husband, temporarily leaving a child with her parents, is, in essence, a search for a partner in migration. Her narrative is replete with emotions and experiences associated with being alone, weariness, and an inability to find her place. Asked when she intends to return, Zebuniso replies: “And where is there for me to go? There’s no place for me at home! I’ve got no place to return to” (PMA 1: Zebuniso). She says her relatives in Dushanbe are living in a two-room apartment: in one room, her parents with her son, and in the second, a brother with his wife and children. In these circumstances, the informant’s son regards the grandmother and grandfather as his parents. Zebuniso has not found a new husband yet. Furthermore, she has gotten a three-year prohibition on entry into the Russian Federation for violating legislation, although she does not understand how this happened. During our last meeting in Dushanbe, Zebuniso was crying, saying she wants to return to Petersburg to earn enough for separate housing in Dushanbe for herself and her son. Not admitting to herself that this will be difficult to achieve, even highly improbable, she is hoping for the resolution of her problems by migration.

The case with Nargiz can also serve as an illustration of non-return within the framework of her biography. The situation is similar to that of Zebuniso—Nargiz is divorced, while her children live with the parents. After twelve years in Petersburg, Nargiz returned home to Dushanbe due to illness. Her tale about life after returning is fully congruent with the way she earlier described her sojourn in Petersburg:

I rent a room for four with girlfriends.... I work from nine in the morning until nine in the evening, one day off per week. I give all the money to mom and dad, who’ve got my daughter and son. I can’t take them in with me for now—there’s no space.... I socialize only with the girls I work with. Every one of us in the beauty salon is the same as me.... You know what attitude we encounter here? Everybody considers that we come back all slutty [*guliashchie*] after migration! (PMA 3: Nargiz)

In essence, Nargiz, like the “girls from the salon,” did not return from migration—now she finds herself in migration in her own society.

The Transnational Perspective

Transnationalism, which had appeared as an idea of expanding, of doubling the social space of migrants despite borders, has now become one of the most popular conceptions. There is even talk of a transnational turn, to the degree that optics of research have significantly shifted. In particular, a rejection of the linear, dichotomic, or bipolar model has occurred. In turn, this has encouraged a rejection of the assimilation model, with its restricting framework causing migrants to be defined as people forced to choose between two communities. In contrast with other conceptions, transnationalism does not look at localized individuals, but at “transmigrants” (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992) leading a “dual life” (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). This in turn allows them to develop and maintain the most diverse transborder mutual relations, incorporating family, economic, cultural, political, and other dynamics. Due to this process, a “transnational social space” (Pries 1999) can be constructed, uniting within itself qualities of two communities—the original and the host. In this respect, migrants are in a dual system of coordinates, simultaneously becoming “one of us” [*svoimi*] and “not one of us” [*chuzhimi*], “legal” and “illegal,” “family” and “nonfamily,” “poor” and “rich,” and so forth, moving from one register to the other as necessary (Abashin, 2012, p. 10). This situational sensitivity in turn enables a particular “translational habitus” (Kelly and Lusis 2006) to be formed, allowing migrants to switch back and forth between frames of reference and fit into different societies.

The cited research is more often conducted on the global scale, and what is discussed is the forming of transnational institutions and supranational financial or human flows. At the same time, a real discovery was the recognition that transnationalism works at the everyday level and that things, ideas, fashion, behavior patterns, and so on relocate together with people (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). According to researchers, migrants implementing the transfer of things home are in essence preparing the ground for their own reintegration (Cassarino 2004).³

What appears more interesting and important for understanding the phenomenon of return is analysis of “nonmaterial” flows, leading not to integration, but rather contributing to rifts and discontinuities. Thus, Alfred Schütz wrote in his essay “*Vozvrashchaiushchiisia domoi [The Homecomer]*” (Shiuts 1995) that after a war, soldiers bring back particular experiences that can be shared only with people who experienced the same events. The host society will not be able to integrate them, for it does not understand them and is not prepared to hear. It is clear that migrants, like participants in combat operations, can bring back unique experiences of sojourn in another milieu, including highly traumatic ones. However, a less obvious phenomenon can trigger significant discontinuities between migrants and the host society, complicating returns and sometimes rendering it impossible due to other social practices, corporeal idioms, patterns, habits, and more. They are more noticeable and evident when a person arrives in another country. In a society where otherness is not regarded as a value and where the attitude toward The Other is strained, such cultural rifts, to my view, trigger ordinary, everyday [*bytovoi*] xenophobia. But this same problem arises upon the return of migrants home as well.

As an example, let us look at the case of Nodira—a woman from Uzbekistan. Nodira is nearly forty years old, with quite a lengthy experience of migration: she had worked in Russia with her parents when still a young woman. After a few years in Uzbekistan, not finding “dignified” (well-paid) work, Nodira came to Petersburg, where she has been working for more than eight years as a cleaning woman in a fitness center. She is easygoing and has many friends among the center employees and its patrons. Nodira and I met for the first time in a café of a fast food chain. She explained in great detail about the harmfulness of such food, saying one must not eat fatty things or have dinner after six o’clock. Nodira admitted that the fitness center employees had taught her a lot, including about proper diet. When there is an opportunity, late at night or early in the morning if there are no patrons, Nodira works out on the exercise machines; she has lost six kilograms and this has made her happy. After a half hour, Nodira confided that she very much wants to get married. She has a boyfriend, the same kind of migrant from Uzbekistan, who loves a good meal, and for whom she prepares Uzbek food, seeking out halal meat in the stores. Nodira loves pilaf too and eats it often. The boyfriend was not happy

with her slimness, and over the past several months she put on five kilograms.

Nodira's various narratives contain sometimes mutually exclusive thoughts. However, it is evident that in reality there is no contradiction. Here one can see how transnationalism works, how the registers and frames of references switch back and forth. They exist side by side in the head of one and the same person, who is aware of the moments of transition between narratives. In this situation, what struck me was not the duality of social reality, but the existence of a "transnational body," which simultaneously loves and does not love fatty meat, which loses weight and gains it depending on society's demands.

It would appear that upon returning home, a person—with assimilated practices and idioms, in a new-look body—is subjected to significant trials. As it turned out, food is one of the problem areas. Nargiz, the migrant from Tajikistan, said that the first days of vacation are rather hard for her. The heat causes headaches, in her opinion, while stomach problems are because, for over a year beyond the border, she became unaccustomed to home food. Such switchovers, tied up with bodily experiences, are little discussed, almost not perceived, but, as research has shown, they can be quite painful. This question demands deeper study.

Transnational switches between realities upon returning can cross over into conflicts. Especially noticeable are the discontinuities when people read situations differently. The most frequent example of this is the arrival of migrants "on vacation"⁴ (temporary return). Both they themselves, and those close to them, who remain at home, speak about the difficulties that arise and the need to "rearrange" the customary mundane reality. Thus, a husband coming home for a month does not intend to work around the house and do customary routine things, for he is planning to relax. For him, this temporary situation is a short pause in his labor activity. Informants (and this holds true for both women and men) noted that upon arrival, they catch up on sleep and meet with relatives and friends. Whereas the expectations of kin, especially the wives of migrants, may be completely different: the arrival is interpreted as a temporary return, but a return nonetheless, while plans for the future are connected with the inclusion of that person in ordinary life and the fulfillment of customary roles and duties. Non-concurring perspectives often lead to conflicts and discontinuities. To some extent, the constant absence of a family member has become "habitualized,"

and a return, especially a temporary one, becomes a problem. Thus, Dil'bora, the wife of a migrant working in Moscow for about ten years, mentioned that her husband, while on vacation, received a temporary prohibition on entry into the Russian Federation and now has to stick around:

A: Lord, I can't wait for him to leave! I've already gotten used to it, so many years without him. But now I've got to cook more, and I've got to take care of him...

Q: You mean to say he doesn't help you out? Is there some kind of work around the house here that you can't do? (The family of the informants lives in a rural locale, in a house without plumbing and heating; they keep a cow.—O.B.)

A: Oh, no! I already know how to do everything by myself for a long time! (PMA 2: Dil'bora)

The Identificational Perspective

Identity is a very complex topic, constantly slipping out of the researcher's view. After Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper's critical article about an impoverishment of the concept of identity (Brubaker and Cooper, 2002), the scholarly community did not stop studying it. However, we should keep in mind that for a mobile nomadic agent, questions of identification remain extremely complex. In entering into dynamic mutual relations with places, cultures, and people, such an agent possesses a multidimensional, plastic, and contextual sense of belonging. It is enough to recall Pico Iyer's "transit lounger," for whom home is not simply multiple, it is found everywhere (Iyer [Aier] 1998). Labor migrants from Central Asia are not as dispersive as the personage in Iyer's essay, but for them also "language" in many ways remains a motherland, although in a situation of multilingualism it too is not that reliable a haven.

A complex phenomenon demands a complex methodology of study. The multiplicity and contextuality of identities that migrants demonstrate are impossible to research directly through straightforward questions: "Who are you, whom do you consider yourself to be, to whom do you belong?" They can be reconfigured through people's concrete social

actions and practices, taking conditions and situations into account. And identities can be “read” in various kinds of projections. Here, work with the time vector, with migrants’ notions about their past and about the future, seems to me interesting and productive. The starting point for this approach must become the thesis: any research into the given question is research of the “present.” Time projections convey primarily the informant’s actual position in the social space.

Work with the past, and the topic of memory, are rather popular in migration research (for example, Pistrick, 2015). As scholars maintain, nostalgia is simultaneously “personal loss of an idealized past and a craving for it” (Abramov 2012, p. 8). That being said, any movement—a departure, or, conversely, a return—triggers emotional experiences and gives rise to nostalgia (Long and Oxfeld 2004), and in its narratives it is possible to reconfigure a migrant’s actual identities (Zborovskii and Shirokova 2003). I maintain that manifestations of nostalgia can be ascertained using various approaches. In particular, analysis of socially acceptable, normalized emotions gives an indication of why an informant “yearns,” what he or she is missing in the new life. This, in turn, leads us to an understanding of a person’s self-awareness and positioning in the social space. Another approach to researching nostalgia is associated with analysis of networks of social interaction. Thus, if at first, upon arriving in another country, turning to one’s compatriots is associated with practical questions, when the community’s resources are used to search for housing, work, and more, in time, existence in such networks is increasingly aimed at maintaining status and producing identities. An example of this is the active involvement of already well-integrated migrants in compatriot Internet communities, where longing for the motherland is “collectively experienced.”

Another possible approach to the study of nostalgia can become research on “things from the motherland,” through which a person not only survives parting with home, leaving it in the past, but also builds up identities.^b According to the accounts of informants who had come to a new place, they yearn for a long time not only for people and relationships, but also for familiar surroundings, for the material environment, which is expressed in other smells, other colors, other weather, other food, and more. Over time, the acuteness of such experiences recedes, and memories of home gradually become “souvenirized” [*suveniriziruiutsia*]. Thus, after vacation, a migrant increasingly no longer

brings things needed for everyday use, but memories and, even more, souvenirs:

Q: Nargiz, what did you bring from vacation home?

A: Oh, not much, almost nothing. A little bit of nuts so I could eat them. For my girls (work colleagues who had become friends—O.B.) some of our flatbreads [*lepeshek*], so they could try them and see what they are. And for my boss one of our national costumes—pants and a dress. Boy, she sure did like that! Said maybe she'd [wear it] around the house. (PMA 1: Nargiz)

Take the example of the office of the personnel department chief of one of Petersburg's transport enterprises, where many Central Asian migrants work. This office is literally covered with robes and skullcaps, with tea-drinking bowls, teapots, and such. Informants tell at length what they are bringing as a present for their employers, apartment landlords, and friends—national clothing, dishes, food, and more. Moreover, these items originally were not souvenirs, but in the new context they changed their designation. It is understandable that there is some demand for them. However, the givers themselves redefine the status of things from their “other,” former life: in the context of migration, they are transferred from the everyday realm to the symbolic. On the one hand, such a practice of “souvenirization” of one's own home brings “one's own” space closer, demonstrates the identities of the migrant connected with the society of origin. On the other hand, a performative identity changes the perception of “one's own” for the actual person. It factually acquires the status of that same souvenir, becomes that place where the experience of the tourist is preeminent. Mekhrafuz, a woman from Tajikistan, recounts: “Now I come home and all the time I'm looking for what can be brought back as a present for my girlfriends, whom I work with. I think: maybe this might be interesting for them” (PMA 1: Mekhrafuz).

In this process, the home space is “removed” from living, everyday experience. In this sense, return is associated with the transformation into “souvenirs”—food, clothing, domestic and various other objects—of a part of ordinary life. Conversely, as research has shown, things brought back home from migration are utilitarian and are utilized daily

in household use. They are not endowed with the meanings of a souvenir, but they do get conferred a higher-quality status. The integration of the two realities takes place with a different symbolic load. “Souvenirization” of one’s mundane reality cannot help bring about a distancing. The process of alienation, multiplied by the new experiences and habits acquired in migration, without doubt complicates reintegration.

As noted above, informants, having returned home, described that they are getting accustomed to food, clothing, weather, and more all over again. What turns out to be the most complicated is reentering the society.⁵ Reverse nostalgia—longing for the place of migration and one’s life there—is quite a widespread phenomenon. Thus, practically all the informants having experience of returning were united in their reactions, saying how much they miss their friends, but even more so the city itself: “I miss Petersburg so much, I’d walk all the way back!” (PMA 3: Zebuniso). “How I want to go back. I can’t now! But at night I even have dreams about it” (PMA 3: Nargiz).

In these circumstances, the strong emotional memories displace musings about just what is not right now, what is missing at home. The only moment of relatively clear agreement in diverse narrative formulations seems to be a sense of freedom that migration had provided. Experiences of emancipation (both women’s and men’s), of getting out from total control of the family clan, are the strongest experiences. *Freedom* is what there is not enough of at home: “In Petersburg the people don’t gossip, you can live without having to look over your shoulder” (PMA 3: Nargiz). The experience of “living without having to look over your shoulder” at family, at surroundings, the opportunity to be different, the experience of new agency—all this complicates return. As research has shown, migrants, having returned, not infrequently feel their own otherness (Constable 2002, p. 205), often associated with the experience of individualization. Do they try to maintain their acquired agency or to fit without conflict into the familiar, but alienated social order? In our case, this is a question for further research. However, the breaking point in a given situation often is evident, and non-return in this sense is quite likely indeed.

While study of the past is a more or less elaborated topic, reflected in scholarly discussions, research into concepts of the future is a relatively new direction, opening prospects for understanding the phenomenon of return (for example Guyer 2007). I propose examining it through the

prism of the musings of migrants about the future, in particular through the study of their plans and the “myth of return.”

Planning for the future among migrants is specific, associated above all with the high degree of uncertainty in their situation: the unstable, constantly changing conditions they find themselves in have a noticeable impact on their actions. Thus, over the past couple of years in Russia, migrational legislation has changed significantly, the practice of prohibitions on entry for any administrative violation has been introduced, and an economic crisis has begun. Besides that, one can speak of migrants’ *sui generis* “unrootedness” and rich experience of mobility, their readiness to fundamentally change their life swiftly and without particular problems. Only short-term planning of the future is possible within such a framework.

Concerning particular characteristics of long-term perspectives, these are associated with multiplicity. Research has shown that people simultaneously hold several possible scripts in their heads in case conditions change. In these circumstances, investments in the future are also multiple. Our case of Rakhmonbek, the migrant from Tajikistan, can serve as an example. On the one hand, he is oriented toward life in Russia—he has acquired Russian citizenship and is looking for an opportunity to buy real estate in Leningrad Oblast to get a permanent registration, without which things are very difficult for him and his family. On the other hand, Rakhmonbek is building a house in Tajikistan, regularly sending money to the motherland and controlling the process from Russia. Now he has gone to visit a buddy in Sweden, to find out about conditions and opportunities for living there. Perhaps in time, if he likes it, he would move his family there. In his situation, the return discussed in this article is possible. But it is no less likely that migrants, even having returned, can also easily leave at any moment, for they remain free, mobile agents held down less by circumstances, for whom movement is the norm.

The so-called myth of return, very widespread among migrants, gets actualized within the framework of work with concepts about the future: “When I come back....” Usually, it is researched from the point of view of functions, in particular, as constituting the diaspora and maintaining collective identities at a distance (e.g., Baumann 2000; Brubaker 2005; Darieva 2011). However, for understanding the phenomenon of return it appears more pertinent to work not with the collectively imagined, but individually: how does this myth work for the creation of identity of a

mobile agent; how much and in what manner is it tied to the social reality of a concrete migrant?

In practically every interview, informants confided their dreams, explaining how they see their future in five, ten, or twenty years. And all these narratives were formulated in the form of a myth. Taking a cue from Roland Barthes, in this situation I understand myth as a system of communication, it is a message with a particular constant form (Barthes, 2000). Projections of the future were often not triggered by the interviewer, but part of informants' free-form stories about their experience of migration. Such narratives were quite standard, not notable for their variety, and formed linguistically and emotionally specifically as a myth of return. Within the framework of such a narration, return was associated with a peaceful life in one's own home, with a trouble-free and healthy old age in the circle of family and other close people. The majority of the informants spoke about this in the sense of acquiring their own home, more often a "little house" [*domika*], their own space. Its location is not always obvious in the stories: it can be found "in the motherland" in a broad sense, not necessarily in the native settlement. Often the place of return is even completely deterritorialized—it is not that important in and of itself. In this respect, the longer a person has spent in migration, the greater detachment from home is demonstrated. In such narratives, return is regarded as reunification with family and finding peace and autonomy (*one's own home*). Further, often what is more important is simply the end of migration as an unstable, dangerous, and complex state, where one's own independence is always subjected to trials. Returning home is more likely a return to oneself, or more precisely to an imagined and desired self.

* * *

Study of the topic of return especially well tells us about the non-return of migrants and about how return is a complex, multivalued, and multi-directional process. As our research has shown, mobile agents are very dynamic. In their relocations, they manifest an "anti-sedentary" logic. Within its framework, movement is normalized, and written into life scripts, for example. For this reason, migrants can fall into contradictions, discontinuities, and conflicts with those who have remained at home, including with family members, for whom sedentariness is the norm.

Research into the phenomenon of return in the transnational, biographical, and identificational perspectives may turn out to be very informative. The richest material for interpretation is generated by study of the emotions of migrants; by elucidating their concepts of past and future, especially concerning manifestations of nostalgia and the myth of return, their future in a community; by analysis of the transnational circulation of things, and the symbolic loading of this process; by understanding migrants' reconfiguration of daily practices and their embodiments.

A person's return home cannot be considered the conclusion of migration; this is a process with an open finale. And this is more than simply because someone with experience in relocating is quick to get up and go. Movement is the most highly sought way of solving problems, for it is already tested and normalized. A migrant consciously engages in creating multiple plans, so that the most suitable variant for a given situation can be chosen in changing situations.

Return home is problematic, for it is associated with important discontinuities on the social, identificational, and everyday levels. Leading to these are: forced restructuring of one's social networks because of temporarily dropping out of them; acquisition of unique experiences of existence in another cultural space; a distancing from the host community and a redefining of one's own position in the new social reality; acquisition of new behavioral practices and embodied idioms, associated with the manner of eating, dressing, moving, caring for one's body, and more. All these discontinuities exemplify the complexity and even lack of finality of the process of return. Paraphrasing a well-known expression: "a migrant is never 'former'" [*"migrant byvshim ne byvaet"*]. Proving this will require more long-term research.

Notes

1. The section is based on joint work with O. Tkach.
2. Used here is a calque from the English term *coethnic*—a member of the same ethnic community, [a less familiar term in Russian].
3. The topic of things is examined in more detail in the third section, "The Identificational Perspective."
4. The concept of "vacation" [*otpusk*] in the given situation is extremely notional, because a migrant's temporary departure beyond the confines of the Russian Federation, governed by the rules of migrational legislation, is usually accompanied by dismissal from work. Such a "vacation," in connection with

external and internal circumstances, can last any length of time. According to our informants, they come home for one to three months.

5. The boundaries that society puts up in relation to its “temporarily gone members” require separate and broader research.

Primary Sources and Materials

- PMA 1—Author's field materials: St. Petersburg, 2014–16 (informants: Rakhmonbek, born 1984; Abror, born 1993; Zebuniso, born 1986; Nargiz, born 1983; Nodira, born 1974; Mekhrafuz, born 1980; Saidullo, born 1959).
- PMA 2—Author's field materials: Tajikistan, Dushanbe and environs, 2015 (informants: Dil'bora, born 1969; Gulia, born approximately 1970).
- PMA 3—Author's field materials: Tajikistan, Dushanbe, 2016 (informants: Zebuniso, born 1986; Nargiz, born 1983).

References

- Abashin, S.N. “Sredneaziatskaia migratsiiia: praktiki, lokal'nye soobshchestva, transnatsionalizm.” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 2012, no. 4, pp. 3–13.
- _____. “Vozvrashchenie domoi: semeinye i migrantsionnye stsenarii v Uzbekistane.” *Ab Imperio*, 2015, no. 3, pp. 125–65.
- Abramov, R.N. “Vremia i prostranstvo nostal'gii.” *Sotsiologicheskii zhurnal*, 2012, no. 4, pp. 5–23.
- Aier [Iyer], P. “Zhizn' tranzitnogo passazhira.” *Russkii zhurnal*, November 13, 1998. <http://old.russ.ru/journal/personon/98-11-13/iyer.htm>. [Original English article: Pico Iyer, “Living in the Transit Lounge.” *Sport 20: Autumn* 1998, March 1998, pp. 147–53.]
- Arowolo, O. “Return Migration and the Problem of Reintegration.” *International Migration*, 2000, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 59–82.
- Barthes [Bart], R. *Mifologii*. Moscow: Izd-vo im. Sabashnikovykh, 2000 [Original French edition: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil, 1957].
- Baumann, M. “Diaspora: Genealogies of Semantics and Transcultural Comparison.” *Numen*, 2000, vol. 47, pp. 313–37.
- Breckner, R. “Case-Oriented Comparative Approaches: The Biographical Perspective as Opportunity and Challenge in Migration Research.” In *Concepts and Methods in Migration Research: Conference Reader*. 2007, pp. 113–52. <http://sowi-serv2.sowi.uni-due.de/culturalcapital/reader/Concepts-and-Methods.pdf>.
- _____. “Collective Identities in Migration. Biographical Perspectives on Ambivalences and Paradoxes.” *Sociology and Anthropology*, 2014, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 15–24.
- Brednikova, O.E., and O.A. Tkach. “Dom dlia nomady.” *Laboratorium*, 2010, no. 3, pp. 72–95.
- Brubaker, R. “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2005, vol. 28, pp. 1–19.
- Brubaker [Brubeiker], R., and F. [Cooper Kuper]. “Za predelami ‘identichnosti’.” *Ab Imperio*, 2002, no. 3, pp. 61–115 [Original English article: Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity.’” *Theory and Society*, February 2000, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 1–47].
- Cassarino, J.-P. “Theorising Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited.” *International Journal on Multicultural Societies (IMS)*, 2004, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 25.
- Constable, N. “At Home but Not at Home: Filipino Narratives of Ambivalent Returns.” In *Republic Filipinos in Global Migrations: At Home in the World?*, ed. F.V. Aguilar. Quezon City:

- Philippine Migration Research Network & Philippine Social Science Council, 2002, pp. 380–412.
- Darieva, Ts. “Vozvrashchenie na rodinu? Novye praktiki diasporal’nogo dvizheniiia.” *Antropologicheskii forum*, 2011, no. 14, pp. 230–51.
- Glick Schiller, N., L. Basch, and C. Blanc-Szanton. “Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration.” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1992, vol. 645, pp. 1–24.
- Guyer, J. “Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time.” *American Ethnologist*, 2007, vol. 34, no 3, pp. 409–21.
- Kelly, P., and T. Lusis. “Migration and the Transnational Habitus: Evidence from Canada and the Philippines.” *Environment and Planning A*, 2006, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 831–84.
- Lerner, J. [Ju.]; T. Rapoport; and E. Lomsky-Feder [Lomski-Feder]. “Russkoiazychnye student v Izraile’skom universitete: kak rabotaet ‘etnokul’turnyi stsenarii’ sovetskikh evreev v emigratsii.” *Diaspora*, 2009, no.2, pp. 62–90.
- Lerner, J.; T. Rapoport; and E. Lomsky-Feder. “The Ethnic Script in Action: The Regrounding of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Israel.” *Ethnos*, 2007, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 168–95.
- Levitt, P., and D. Lamba-Nieves. “Social Remittances Revisited.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2011, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 1–22.
- Ley, D., and A. Kobayashi. “Back to Hong Kong: Return Migration or Transnational Sojourn?” *Global Networks*, 2005, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 111–27.
- Long, L., and E. Oxfeld. “Introduction.” In *Coming Home? Refugees, Migrants and Those Who Stayed Behind*, ed. L.D. Long and E. Oxfeld. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pp. 1–48.
- Pistrick, E. *Performing Nostalgia: Migration Culture and Creativity in South Albania*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Portes, A., L.E. Guarnizo, and P. Landolt. “The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1999, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 217–37.
- Pries, L. “New Migration in Transnational Spaces.” In *Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*, ed. L. Pries. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, pp. 1–35.
- Sheller, M., and J. Urry. “The New Mobilities Paradigm.” *Environment and Planning A*, 2006, vol. 38, pp. 207–26.
- Shiuts [Schuetz, Schutz, Schütz], A. “Vozvrashchajushchiisia domoi.” *Sotsis [Socis]*, 1995, no. 2, pp. 139–42.[Original English article: Alfred Schuetz, “The Homecomer.” *American Journal of Sociology*, March 1945, vol. 50, no. 5, pp. 369–76].
- Temkina, A.A. “Stsenarii seksual’nosti i gendernye razlichiiia.” In *V poiskakh seksual’nosti*, ed. E.A. Zdravomyslova and A.A. Temkina.St. Petersburg: Izd-vo Dmitrii Bulanin, 2002, pp. 247–86.
- Thomas, W., and F. Znaniecki. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Vol. 1, *Primary-Group Organization*. New York: Richard G. Badger, Gorham Press, 1927.
- Urry, J. [Urri, Dzh.]. *Mobil’nosti*. Moscow: Praksis, 2012a [Original English book: John Urry, *Mobilities*. Malden: Polity, 2007].
- _____. *Sotsiologiia za predelami obshchestv. Vidy mobil’nosti dlja XXI stoletiiia*. Moscow: Izdatel’skii dom “Vysshiaia shkola ekonomiki,” 2012b [Original English: John Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies. Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge, 2000].
- Varshaver, E.A., and A.L. Rocheva. “Soobshchestva v kafe kak sreda integratsii inoetничnykh migrantov.” *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniiia: ekonomicheskie i sotsial’nye peremeny*, 2014, no. 3 (121), pp. 104–14.
- Zborovskii, G.E., and E.A. Shirokova. “Nostal’giia rossiiskikh emigrantov: probnyi opros v Finlandii.” *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 2003, no. 8, pp. 75–80.

Zimmel', G. "Prikliuchenie." In G. Zimmel', *Izbrannoe*, vol. 2. Moscow: Iurist, 1996, pp. 212–26 [Original German essay: Georg Simmel, "Das Abenteuer." In Georg Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur. Gesammelte Essais*. Leipzig: Kröner, 1911, pp. 7–24].

Editor's Notes

a. Translator Stephan Lang points out that Roswitha Breckner terms her methodology, as do many anthropologists, a "case-oriented comparative approach."

b. A variation on this insight is a personal example of a poignant gift moment I had with a well-known Tajik leader, originally from a mountain village in Tajikistan. When he gave our family gorgeous hand-knit traditional Tajik socks that he had carried with him since childhood, I first wanted to reject the gift. But I then realized it was his way of liberating himself from his nostalgia, transferring his loss of homeland to a new home.