Part I
MOBILITIES AND INTIMACIES
In the spring of 1999 Zhenia and I sat by an apartment window in Tura, a central Siberian town in the Evenk District. In between tapping her ashes into the stove with her long fingernails painted in a deep red, Zhenia told me about her recent buying trips. Zhenia and I had come to know each other over seven years, since just before the end of the Soviet Union. As an indigenous Siberian, Zhenia had been the beneficiary of a number of affirmative action programs still in place in educational institutions in the 1990s; she had unsuccessfully trained to become a medical assistant and later a lawyer, before dedicating herself to educating special needs children and becoming a teacher. Zhenia felt stuck in this profession when I met her in 1992, and by 1993 she had endured months at a time without receiving a paycheck. Finally, in 1995 Zhenia looked to business as a profession, first working as an assistant for her older brother’s grocery supply company and then in 1998 starting her own clothing import business.

Sitting in my second-story apartment we burned through a pack of Kosmos cigarettes and watched from the window as townspeople planted potatoes. Zhenia savored recounting the travails of her year. She declared that she would not return to Central Asia. On a trip earlier that year, while making a tiring journey by truck across Kazakhstan, Zhenia was mugged and lost the $1,000 she had brought along intending to purchase clothing for resale.¹ That was a hard way to make a living. She contrasted this with her satisfying and profitable trip to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). She felt lucky that she had managed to travel there, since soon after her trip the government ceased to issue visas to women
under thirty unless a brother or husband accompanied them.² Zhenia brushed aside the UAE’s concerns about young women taking up sex work; she remembered the Arab men’s attention with fondness and recounted how she “felt like a queen” during her wholesale buying trip.³ She had purchased several bundles of clothing for resale back in Siberia and described the thrill she felt in hiring men with trolleys to deposit her wares at her hotel. “I did not have to lift a finger!” She inspected her nails and reflected, “There, they really know how to treat a woman like a lady; they even kissed my hand in parting!” While Zhenia did not return to the UAE, her myriad subsequent trips to Turkey were as much about the new forms of intimacy that she and other women sometimes savored as transnational migrants as they were about supplying the growing demand for fashionable clothing in Siberia.

Zhenia is part of a global trend where women have become increasingly mobile since the 1970s. If until then men typically migrated, with women and children sometimes accompanying men as dependents, today about equal numbers of men and women are international migrants; of the 244 million people in the world today who live outside their country of origin (UNFPA 2015), half are women. People are on the move due to civil war, natural disasters, and unstable governments, but women’s mobility, in particular, increased as of the 1970s with the global turn toward intensified economic restructuring that brought about the retraction of government services and new forms of precarity, along with an expansion of service economies and the demand for low-wage labor. As Zhenia’s comments suggest, thinking about gender and migration in the former Soviet Union (FSU) can telescope our attention to how global economic crises and related neoliberal restructuring are integrally tied to what is often relegated to “emotional,” “private,” or “intimate” realms.⁴ Once state socialism was, as one particularly apt analysis has noted, “no more” (Yurchak 2003), transnational mobility came to define lives on a scale not seen in this part of Eurasia since the end of the Second World War.

In the pages of this book I trace these linkages between transnational mobility, brought about by the end of socialism and the expansion of global capitalism, and the daily relationships that are often sidelined in accounts of migration. In so doing I show the radical ways that new mobility has shaped intimate practices or the emotional worlds and social ties of women, men, and children in Eurasia. A key trajectory of transnational migration out of the former Soviet Union has been to Turkey, and as post-Soviet women have engaged in circular migration between the former Soviet Union and Turkey, they have forged new forms of intimacy that are central to their transnational mobility. Post-Soviet women like Zhenia are not simply crossing physical borders. They are also part of renewed transnational flows between places that over much of
the twentieth century were widely conceived of as East or West, capitalist or socialist, or modern or traditional, especially concerning questions of gender and sexuality. In moving between the lives of post-Soviet women employed in Istanbul in three distinct spheres—sex work, the garment trade, and domestic work—I consider how migrant women negotiate emotion, intimate relationships, and unpredictable state power shaping their labor. Moreover, in decoupling images of women on the move from simple assumptions about danger, victimization, and exploitation, I turn our attention to the intricate lives of people and the intimate ties, often based on love or commitment, that they foster in their transnational mobility.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a decade (2001–2011) in Turkey, Moldova, and Russia, this book is grounded in the accounts of post-Soviet migrant women like Zina, Irina, and Olga, who all turned to transnational labor migration to Istanbul with the end of socialism in the region. In the mid-1990s Zina boarded a minibus in southern Moldova to seek work in Istanbul; in the wake of devastating economic restructuring, her job as a medical orderly had gone unpaid for months, and her husband had died while working on a temporary construction brigade in Moscow. Employed for over fifteen years in domestic work in Istanbul, Zina was able to earn a living; she renovated her home back in Moldova and supported two children through postsecondary education. Others—like Olga, a shuttle trader from Russia, and Irina, an exotic dancer from Ukraine—traveled as much out of a newfound sense of possibility as out of necessity. These sentiments, reflecting novel gender systems encountered by women border crossers, as well as excitement about unprecedented opportunities to travel, echo central themes in the many conversations I had with post-Soviet women moving between the former Soviet Union and Turkey. In portraying mobile post-Soviet women who are reweaving a social fabric frayed with the end of socialism, I aim to show in these pages how women are reworking intimacy in a time of widely atomized lives.

This is most definitely not a story of progression, of people mastering the ways of capitalism, and on the way jettisoning their “backward” socialist ways. Instead, this is a story of continuities and interweavings, of visions of modernity (failed, emerging, or contested), and ways that feminized mobility fits into a pattern of neoliberal restructuring that is increasingly defining Eurasia, including Turkey and the former Soviet Union. By focusing on women who struggle to maintain lives across recently porous transnational borders, this book provides a unique portal into reconfigurations of power and possibility in Eurasia. The new forms of mobility in the region have acted as a sort of handmaiden to reflections about “modernity,” complicating liberal narratives that can assume a trajectory from an “oppressive” state socialism to the “opportunities” offered by global capitalism.
Socialist paradigms and forms of governance, however, were not immediately or evenly displaced, and people who lived under state socialism have widely continued to reflect on a sense of a derailed socialist modernity (Berdahl 1999; Yurchak 2003; Dunn 2004; Ghodsee 2009).

Many women I met, like Zhenia, recounted how they were initially dazzled by the possibilities created by border crossing and the intimate economies they encountered, but many also bitterly critiqued what they had lost with their insertion into circuits of global capitalism. Some scholars argue that with new forms of mobility, and the constriction of others, mobility itself has become a sign that is concomitant with modernity (see Chu 2010). Similarly, I see mobility as enabling us to understand shifting ideals associated with “modernity,” something of a slippery category (see Cooper 2005, 113–49), but one often invoked by migrants I met in reference to gender ideals and intimate practices (see Abu-Lughod 1997). In writing about post-Soviet women who travel across wide expanses to work and live in Turkey for lengthy periods of time, I argue that intimate practices between men and women, mothers and children, grandmothers and children, and migrant women and Turkish men are a central part of the story of the massive mobility brought about by the intensifying forces of global capitalism and the waning power of state socialism. In presenting a portrait of intimate practices as at the crux of the experience of transnational border crossing, this book turns away from dominant discourses revolving around remittances, border regulation, and victimization and instead seeks to turn our attention to the experience of women migrants making lives for themselves in a newly transnational space.

**Post-Soviet Subjects on the Move in Eurasia**

Although the research for this book is largely based in Istanbul, Turkey, the focus is on post-Soviet migrants as people on the move, and less on the Turks with whom migrants interact. The migrants who are the subject of this book are diverse. Their time in Turkey can be sojourns of just a few days, but mostly it is years on end punctuated by variable “circular” patterns of short visits to home communities. A handful of migrants work with official contracts, but the vast majority arrive on tourist visas to work, and then overstay their visas, making them “undocumented”; they do not have the legal right to work, and having overstay visas, they no longer have the legal right to be in Turkey. They come from a wide range of countries, including Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Russia, and Georgia. Despite this diversity, labor migrants from the former Soviet Union are predominantly women and share a history of living in societies shaped by socialism, including a particular
FIGURE 1. Map of Eurasia, focused on Turkey and the Black Sea Region. Created by Jayme Taylor.
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ethic around the meanings of citizenship and a lingua franca of Russian. They also share the experience of being widely perceived by the Turkish public as hypersexualized (Gülçür and ılkkaracan 2000). Overall, the deeply gendered post-Soviet mobility into Turkey fundamentally defines the transnational circuits women maintain between Istanbul and home communities. Long-term migrants frequently foster close ties to transnational families, pursue their own aspirations for adventure and independence, and often establish emotionally meaningful ties with men in Turkey. In writing about the transnational lives and intimate practices of these newly mobile post-Soviet women, I seek to trace what one scholar has called the “routes” and the “roots” of people on the move (Clifford 1997); while the “routes” I trace are between the former Soviet Union and Turkey, and the “roots” are very much in a shared post-Soviet space, I also give particular emphasis to one community of post-Soviet migrants prevalent in Istanbul, women from southern Moldova.

Transnational Circuits between the FSU and Turkey

Like Roger Rouse, who writes of the “crisscrossed economies, intersecting systems of meaning, and fragmented identities brought about by a newly globalized world” (1991, 8), this book moves away from a more traditional ethnographic focus on a single place or ethnic group and instead revolves around transnational circuits and flows. Inspired by a vibrant body of scholarship on transnational migration (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller 1999; Ong 1999), and particularly the gendered nature of this mobility (Morokvasic 1984; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Constable 2003; Hirsch 2003; Cheng 2010), I seek to show how mobility has become central to the daily lives of people in this part of Eurasia, as well as to portray the diverse ties post-Soviet labor migrants maintain both in Istanbul and with friends and family across the FSU and beyond. Post-Soviet labor migrants often aim to work in West European countries where pay is most lucrative (Ghençea and Gudumac 2004; Subbotina 2007), but in practice they go closer to home. For instance, Russia is the primary country for the shuttle trade in garments from Turkey, and it is also a major receiving country for labor migrants from the former Soviet Union, including from Central Asian countries, Ukraine, and Moldova (Bloch 2014; Reeves 2014, Demintseva and Kashnitsky 2016). In Russia migrant men and women find work in construction and apartment renovation, as well as in the service sector, with women increasingly in demand as domestic labor. Meanwhile in Turkey, women migrants are overwhelmingly in demand, especially in the service sectors of entertainment, domestic work, or sales (as shop assistants and interpreters), while there is far less demand for migrant men’s labor.
Moldova, in particular, has a striking profile of labor migration, including into Turkey. Since the late 1990s almost 20 percent of working-age Moldovans have lived outside Moldova in a given year; in 2009 as much as 23 percent of the Moldovan GDP came from official remittances (Ghențeа and Gudumac 2004, 41; Subbotina 2007; UNDP 2011, 129). Unofficial remittances and payments for goods, like the thousands of dollars that one of my interlocutors clandestinely strapped around her midriff on regular trips from Ukraine and Moldova as payment for goods bought in Turkey, also play a substantial role in this financial flow. Similar to Rhacel Parreñas’s (2001a) findings among Filipino transnational families, the remittance economy tying Moldovans to Turkey, and to Russia, is closely linked to an elaborate renegotiation of familial responsibilities and nurturing roles. Women’s and men’s long and/or frequent absences from home, their remittances, and their new spheres of work influence their roles as parents, spouses, and citizens in households and communities with which they maintain variable links.

The new social and economic roles that post-Soviet women, in particular, have come to occupy as they move goods, ideas, and remittances across post-Soviet borders are an important aspect of this expansive labor migration, which has received little attention. Women’s accounts of their labor and their efforts to continue labor migration despite increased policing of borders tell a story that is too often overshadowed by accounts of victimization at the hands of criminal elements (e.g., Hughes 2000; Malarek 2003). In turning attention to the migrants and their intimate practices, we can understand the ways that post-Soviet women actively strategize to cross borders, including by remarrying so as to have passports reissued with new surnames, establishing long-term liaisons and marriage with Turkish men, and procuring work as entertainers in clubs. However, we can also think about how media and government structures inform intimate practices, and how not just individuals but also households are involved in intimate practices of nurturing those who are left behind in home communities. Overall, post-Soviet women’s experiences of border crossing for labor migration fit within a global trend of gendered flexible labor that serves new forms of transnational capital and indelibly links intimate practices across wide expanses (Colen 1995; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002).

With tourist visas available on entry as of the early 1990s, women arrived in Turkey by the thousands just as tensions between secularist and Islamist visions of modernity were intensifying (see White 2002). The ideals of the growing Turkish Islamist movement—defined by political and revivalist sentiments, including gendered codes of modesty—have particularly contrasted with visible markers of women’s sexuality expressed by many secular urbanites in Turkey, including
Russian-speaking migrant women like Zhenia (Öncü 1999; White 1999). Post-Soviet women have become the lightning rods for fraught discussions around gendered codes of modesty and expressions of women’s sexuality (Hann and Beller-Hann 1998; Hacagoonlu 2002; Uygun 2004). The very ability to engage in transnational border crossing marks postsocialist women in Turkey as transgressive, something that contributes to their symbolic capital as embodying “modern” forms of intimacy (Giddens 1992; Parla 2009). Although Turkey is not the only destination for post-Soviet women labor migrants, it does seem to be the only one with such a high demand for feminized labor that for more than two decades consisted predominantly of migrant women from the former Soviet Union.

From the early 1990s, as the former Soviet region’s economies collapsed, the Turkish economy flourished. Turkey established an impressive civic infrastructure, expanded a solid professional middle class that was increasingly educated at prestigious overseas institutions, and built an economy based on agriculture, manufacturing, and textile production aimed at exporting to European and North American markets. Turkey was also fast becoming a popular destination for tourism, which from the late 1990s became one of the largest spheres of employment for Turks and non-Turks alike (Icoz et al. 1998; Gokovali 2010). Despite a major domestic economic crisis in 2000 and the global economic crisis in 2009, for nearly twenty years Turkey saw an overall steady rate of economic growth. This growth has benefited from the extralegal flow of “irregular circular migrants” from the former Soviet Union, a large proportion of them coming from Moldova to fill the demand for low-paid, flexible, feminized labor in the growing service and informal manufacturing sectors (Icduygu and Yukseler 2012, 448; Keough 2015). But an economic “pull” factor is not the only way to understand what compels post-Soviet women to look toward Istanbul as a place to transform their lives. Turning to the intimate practices of migrants in Istanbul draws us to consider how aspirations and imagination are at least as important as the pursuit of economic well-being.

Glamour-“scapes,” Bollywood, and the Power of Imagination

In recent decades a plethora of work has turned to the imagination in examining exactly how aspirations become important for understanding the cultural dimensions of a recently intensified global economy. In particular, Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) widely referenced work—pointing to global flows of images, people, money, and information via what he terms “-scapes”—has informed how scholars have sought to understand the gendered dimensions of global mobility. Studies of “sexscapes” of “sex tourism” in the Dominican Republic (Brennan 2004) and “marriagescapes” of so-called “mail order,” or “correspondence,”
marriage in North America (Constable 2003) have evocatively explored the
time of the imagination in propelling women’s aspirations for transnational
mobility. However, the relatively limited scholarship on shifting expressions of
intimacy or sexuality in post-Soviet locations has tended to overlook the crucial
role of the imagination and has focused instead on economic forces and “asocial”
behavior brought about by the “chaos” of post-Soviet society (e.g., Nazpary 2001;
Shlapentokh 2003). This approach downplays how diverse historical forces were
shaping ideals of glamour, romance, and sexuality even in the late Soviet period
and instead narrowly features the role of the state in regulating sexuality, with an
emphasis on asocial sexuality as a symptom of the onslaught of Western capital-
ism. As elsewhere, in the Soviet Union there were multiple possibilities for how
local practices might incorporate or refute global influences (see Larkin 1998).

A number of accounts of the history of sexuality in the former Soviet Union
feature “the West” as a discursive force linked to mobility, especially for intel-
lectuals (e.g., Shlapentokh 2003, 119), but even in a Soviet society where inter-
national travel was available only to a handful of elites, other foreign influences
widely shaped aspirations, particularly among women. In the realm of emotions
and intimacy, films produced in India were one of these important forces, as is
evident in how often post-Soviet women I encountered in Istanbul referenced
these films as sources of inspiration and relaxation in their lives. These reflec-
tions testify to how visual culture shapes imagination, and in this case the visual
culture is a legacy of goodwill measures between India and the Soviet Union from
the 1950s through the 1980s, when Soviet citizens were widely exposed to Indian
film. The Soviet government purchased more than 190 popular Indian films and
made Indian art films available at regular film festivals (Rajagopalan 2008, 8),
as well as frequently broadcasting Indian films on television and featuring them
in theaters and community centers in cities and small towns from Moscow to
Moldova to Central Siberia.

Today people (mostly women) buy both classic Indian films and Bollywood
blockbusters in the form of DVDs or eagerly turn to satellite television chan-
nels showing these films. The women I encountered in Istanbul watched these
with friends on their days off and invoked favorite scenes and actors in casual
conversation. Both younger and older women I met referenced Indian films as
“romantic,” depicting “true love,” and portraying “beautiful, glamorous women”
dressed in elegant, brilliant colored saris. Entertainers also spoke of drawing on
Bollywood for inspiration for dance moves, and in several instances I joined
entertainers in Istanbul when they shopped for performance outfits emulating
styles they had observed in Bollywood films. While none of the women I met
sought to work in India, many cited Indian film as their key source for romantic
ideals and images of glamorous women. Their sentiments echoed those of men
and women interviewed in Russia in the early 2000s who reflected on the appeal
of Indian cinema as a “respite from a dull, unchanging and homogenous reality” (Rajagopalan 2008, 42). The typical genre of hyperemotional Indian cinema
provided a window onto something exotic, but the popular romances especially
validated women’s desires to explore lives of passion, femininity, and glamour,
states of being that were discouraged under late socialism and difficult to realize
during the economic hardship following the end of socialism.

As Niki, a migrant from southern Moldova told me while we sipped our non-
alcoholic beers in her apartment in Istanbul, “The beautiful Indian women in
those films really know how to be feminine!” Imagining a glamorous life abroad
played a part in compelling many women to seek work in Turkey, a destination
more accessible to them than India and one with its own growing industry of melodramatic film. Moreover, once women became labor migrants, their
ongoing consumption of such films served as one source for post-Soviet women
migrants’ reflections on love, romance, and more broadly, intimate economies in
their daily lives.

Histories of Soviet and Post-Soviet Mobility

From the 1960s onward there was considerable contact between Soviet people
and others from “socialist camp” countries in Eastern Europe and Asia, including
India and Vietnam but also places like Cuba, Nicaragua, and Angola (Matusevich
2007). However, only in the early 1970s were cultural exchanges between “the
West” and the Soviet Union first established after decades of virtually imperme-
able borders (Gorsuch and Koenker 2006). These were soon followed by more
widespread opportunities for student exchanges and cultural collaborations,
albeit with carefully selected participants from the Soviet side, but only in the
late 1980s did it become widely possible for Soviet citizens to provide a personal
letter of invitation (priglashenie) and apply for an exit visa to travel as a tourist
to “the West.” After 1991, when the Soviet Union ended, it finally became possible
for Soviet citizens to depart from their country even without exit visas.

At the same time, the state gradually ceased to supply many government-run
stores, and shuttle traders like Zhenia began to fill a large gap in the demand for
clothing (and other consumer goods) throughout this part of Eurasia. As a range
of women recounted, throughout the 1990s they expanded their roles as small-
scale traders to support themselves and their families, buying mostly clothing
during short trips ranging from a few days to a few weeks in duration and resell-
ing those wares in their home communities. Depending on the social networks
they could draw on to borrow capital, traders typically invested from $100 to
$1,000 to purchase merchandise on each trip. In this way, the “shuttle traders” (chelnoki), or “suitcase” traders, most often women, literally transported goods back to community street markets in suitcases. By 1996, however, government restrictions on imports into post-Soviet countries made the shuttle trade unprofitable for all but those with sufficient capital to pay for the services of shipping companies able to evade the high government import duties. The more successful traders continued to move apparel from China, the United Arab Emirates, and especially Turkey, with the assistance of freight companies specializing in cargo delivery to their specific cities, including Moscow, Khabarovsk, Kishinev, or Almaty (Aktar and Ögelman 1994; Zhurzhenko 1999).

This history of post-Soviet mobility forms a critical part of the backdrop to the experience of many post-Soviet border crossers, including shuttle traders like Zhenia, whose mobility inserted them into a global economy and required them to engage with new intimate economies but also with rapidly shifting border regimes. Although this situation is not unlike those described by scholars writing about migrant women in Japan (Faier 2009) or South Korea (Cheng 2010), in the case of migrant women from the former Soviet Union, gender ideals, mobility, and intimate practices come together in distinctive ways.

FIGURE 2. In Laleli at stores catering to Russian speakers. Photograph by author, 2015.


**INTRODUCTION**

**GENDER AND MOBILITY**

Official Soviet visions of modernity and related gender ideals and intimate practices were hardly monolithic and were being publicly contested by the late 1980s, well before the actual end of the Soviet Union in December 1991 (e.g., Kunin 1991). However, the austerity measures and economic restructuring introduced as central requirements of International Monetary Fund and World Bank provisions imposed on the region in the early 1990s accelerated the reworking of gender ideals and intimacy. By 1996 the government had transferred more than a hundred thousand commercial concerns to private ownership; with the privatization of more than fifteen thousand factories, more than 60 percent of the industrial workforce was jobless (Stanley 1996; Grant 1999, 242). Women were fired in disproportionate numbers, and by 1992 in some regions they accounted for more than two-thirds of those registered as unemployed (Ashwin and Bowers 1997, 35). With women’s labor critical to the survival of households, women turned to informal and semilegal forms of work, including the transnational small-scale garment trade, domestic work, and sex work (Hann and Hann 1992; Aktar and Ögelman 1994; Zhurzhenko 1999; Nazpary 2001; Akalin 2007), all part of the increasingly global, and thriving, economy in nearby Turkey.

In considering the radical, and sometimes devastating, reworking of women’s labor in the 1990s, I turn my attention to intimate economies to show what the implications have been for individuals, households, and communities. In grounding my analysis in the transnational encounters that have linked people in this part of Eurasia for hundreds of years—from even before the Ottoman and Russian Empires, to Russia as a current petro-power and Turkey as a major crossroads for people on the move—I hope to show continuities as well as more recent ruptures brought about with global capitalism. Overall, while forces of global capitalism shape practices of intimacy in the region today, historically specific relations of power are also key to understanding the ways in which mobility and intimacy are intertwined in this part of Eurasia.

**Postsocialism, Transnational Mobility, Intimacy**

An abundance of research on the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has considered how the end of socialism brought about uniquely gendered transformations (Temkina and Rotkirch 1997; Gal and Kligman 2000; Pine 2002b; Haney 2003), and social scientists have reflected on migration processes into and out of the FSU (e.g., Malyshova and Tiuriukanova 2000; Tiuriukanova 2003; Ghençea and Gudumac 2004; Subbotina 2007; Reeves 2014; Marsden and Ibanez-Tirado 2015). However, scholars have scarcely considered how legacies of socialism, gender regimes, and new forms of mobility come together in the
region. In this book I bring these bodies of scholarship together with a focus on three intertwined themes: postsocialism, transnational mobility, and intimacy. The concept of “postsocialism” is closely linked to that of “modernity,” something that has featured prominently in social science literature since the 1990s, including as something forged in conjunction with global capitalism (Harvey 1989; Giddens 1992; Appadurai 1996), as in tension with “tradition” (Huntington 1996), as taking multiple forms (Ong 1999; Rofel 1999), and as something that should be seen as a “claim-making” device that can be deployed strategically (Cooper 2005, 146). The vibrant body of work on modernity cuts across scholarship on gendered mobility and migration, illustrating the ways in which aspirations to be “modern” also compel many people to seek opportunity far from home and from the demands of domestic life (Constable 2005; Faier 2009). Questions of modernity are also central in the literature on late socialism and postsocialism, with work examining questions of gender and intimacy (Berdahl 1999; Yang 2003), visions of modernity among non-Russians in the Soviet Union (Grant 1995; Bloch 2003a), and how people living in the former Soviet Union make sense of a supposedly invincible and “radiant” modern society that was “forever” until it was “no more” (Buck-Morss 2000; Yurchak 2003; Bloch and Kendall 2004).

Postsocialism and Eurasia

This ethnography is shaped by a rich literature on postsocialism in Eurasia (e.g., Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Hann et al. 2002; Humphrey and Mandel 2002; Buyandelgeriyn 2008; Rogers and Verdery 2013). While scholars have widely debated the utility of “postsocialism” as a concept, I argue that the term “postsocialism,” and the closely related term “post-Soviet,” serve important analytical purposes since they describe a common historical experience. As Hann explains, the term “postsocialism” can productively convey the common experience of “Marxist-Leninist socialism, the reproduction of a common layer of socialist institutions, [and] ideology and moral purpose over two generations or more” (Hann et al. 2002, 11). Furthermore, the term “postsocialist” encapsulates the ways in which a Soviet past influenced and continues to influence specific ways of understanding gender, labor, and morality for those who lived under state socialism in the region. By invoking postsocialist experience, these shared histories can be critically signaled. Following scholars who point out that the term “postsocialist” has utility as long as it is used to define specific contexts and practices (Humphrey and Mandel 2002, 3), here I use this term to underscore the ways in which a common experience of socialism has shaped intimate practices in a neocapitalist era defined by transnational migration.
My analysis has a commonality with a number of works that consider how Soviet-era economic practices and exchange networks of favors have shaped social life and are now overshadowed by cash-based transactions and less clear social obligations and moral responsibilities (Humphrey and Mandel 2002; Wanner 2005; Patico 2008; Rogers 2009; Zigon 2011). In considering how a legacy of socialism shapes transnational mobile practices, I focus attention on the emotional and affective dimensions of intimate practices forged by “newly capitalist” transnational migrants. Also, transformations of gender ideologies and related practices of intimacy under postsocialism inform my analysis. As in many locations where socialism defined daily practice over recent decades, the end of socialism in the region of the former Soviet Union brought about a radical shift in public discourses on gender (Posadskaia 1994; Gal and Kligman 2000; Pine 2002b; Hemment 2007), a subject I turn to in chapters 4 and 5. Although some might downplay a common experience of state socialism as an analytical framework for how people in Eurasia navigate the world (e.g., Barrera-González et al. 2013; Keough 2015), I argue that the legacy of state socialism significantly shapes how migrants from the FSU talk about their relationships, their work, and their daily lives, and therefore remains salient.

Transnational mobility, and the new social locations it requires women and men migrants to occupy, magnifies questions about gender and generation. This is particularly the case as socialist gender ideologies that emphasize women’s “public” roles in society come up against more recent prevailing discourses in these neocapitalist societies, which associate women with domesticity and/or view them as sexual commodities (Einhorn 1993; Goscilo 1993; Rotkirch et al. 2007). My interviewees spoke about a Soviet era when many of the older labor migrants were factory workers or employed in agricultural spheres, but some were engineers, accountants, or hospital administrators; they recounted how they saw their labor as officially respected and rewarded. In interviews, many older women, regardless of professional background, lamented being inserted into a global service economy where ideals of socialist labor had no meaning, and they no longer had any social protections in the form of pensions, overtime, sick leave, or mechanisms for gender equity. In contrast, younger women tended to consider their work and life in Istanbul as exciting, urbane, and an escape from the confining socialist structures and gender ideals of the past. One of the key themes in the following pages is how, depending on their generation, women differentially evaluate the way mobility has shaped their lives and the lives of those close to them.

In thinking about transnational mobility, the term “Eurasia” also invites us to look beyond boundaries imposed by states, entities that do not last forever,
and instead consider flows and exchanges transregionally. The concept of “Eurasia” usefully blurs boundaries, while also being elastic, something that has made the term appealing for many scholars writing about border-defying processes and experiences in the region (Von Hagen 2004). Moreover, as Jennifer Suchland has shown, the term “Eurasia” can productively decenter how Europe, Russia, and the United States are frequently seen as the implicit yardsticks by which social processes and gendered power are measured (2011, 838). Suchland usefully argues that the term challenges the too neatly defined boundaries of the nation-state and thereby further points us toward critically assessing the histories of diverse forms of power in the region (2011, 856). In its association with a broad, shifting expanse, “Eurasia” can simultaneously encompass places that are tightly linked by a shared history of state socialism and neighboring places with significant historical, trade, and cultural ties. The concept of Eurasia holds the analytical potential for allowing us to look beyond national borders and instead consider how large-scale transformations extend across borders as people come into contact with one another in an alternative global, or at least regional, system (Ong 1999; Sassen 2013). As Rogers and Verdery reflect on the term “postsocialism” (2013, 450), “Eurasia” can also be useful for continuing to examine the relationships between region and theory in anthropology. For the purposes of this book, I employ the term “Eurasia” in portraying the flows of ideas and images, trade goods, and people that for centuries have stretched between areas currently identified as part of the former Soviet Union and neighboring Turkey.

Transnational Mobility

Historically social scientists have studied migrants from the perspective of bounded communities and fixed nation-states, where a group was typically framed as moving from a “homeland” to a “host” or “settlement” country and largely severing, or at least attenuating, ties to home. In an effort to theorize the implications of globalization for our world, scholars have turned away from dominant models informed by modernization theory, defined by “peripheries” and a few key “centers,” binary understandings of migrants and their milieus reflected in terms like “assimilation,” “homeland,” and “resettlement,” and naturalized notions of the steady state of nation-states (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller 1999; Brettell 2015). Instead, a rich realm of theory, sometimes animated by the place of aspiration and imagination in compelling mobility (Appadurai 1996) but widely focused on connections, flows, and multiple ties of belonging and allegiance, now resonates through scholarship concerned with mobility, diasporas, and transnational “social fields” and “circuits” expressed in the form of activist
groups to transnational religious spaces to new migrant communities across the
globe (e.g., Rouse 1992; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008; Abashin 2012). Notably,
some have argued that globalization, including transnational border crossing, is
not a new phenomenon (e.g., Ghosh 1992; Mintz 1998). However, the extensive
scholarship in the 1990s and 2000s that took stock of how an increase in ease
of travel, nearly instantaneous communication, global financial networks, and
a burgeoning of media all intensified transnational ties has confirmed this to be
an important area for research (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Vertovec 1999;
Constable 2003).

Although studies of globalization in terms of “transnationalism” have widely
sought to position the nation-state as just one of many actors in transnational
social fields, increasingly scholars have focused on states and state-like structures
to critically examine how groups of people are differentially capable of pursuing
transnational aspirations (Willen 2005; Mahdavi 2011; Ticktin 2011; Constable
2014). Furthermore, scholars are increasingly placing the very mechanisms of
state border regulation at the center of their analyses (De Genova and Peutz
2010; Cabot 2014; Reeves 2014). Whether scholars focus on ongoing flows, dia-
sporic sentiments, or state mechanisms for policing borders, an emphasis on
transnational frameworks, “multi-sited” methodologies (Marcus 1995), and a
recognition of the multiplicity of actors shaping border crossing, have all become
foundational for studies of mobility.

Growing out of the broader critique of hegemonic categories deployed in
social science research and writing (Behar and Gordon 1996; Lewin and Sil-
verstein 2016), by the early 1980s feminist scholars began challenging perva-
sive assumptions that all people on the move would have similar experiences of
migration and instead proposed a gendered analysis of migration (Morokvasic
1984). By the 1990s and early 2000s a rich literature examining the intersection of
gender, power, and mobility had emerged (e.g., Massey 1994; Collier 1997; Parre-
nas 2001b; Pessar and Mahler 2003), including ethnographies dedicated to exam-
ining how gendered mobility shapes structures of intimacy (Constable 2003;
Hirsch 2003; Brennan 2004). Scholars also began to examine how new structures
of feeling—including new forms of romance, courtship, and “companionate”
marrage—are accompanied by the global circulation of (and sometimes contes-
tation of) what are perceived to be “modern” forms of intimacy (Rebhun 1999;
Ahearn 2001; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006). Scholars have also turned their atten-
tion to the intersection of local, national, and global processes and histories that
make cross-border marriages and other types of intimacies “imaginable” and
where there are not always clear lines between relationships of love, obligation,
and transaction (Constable 2005; Faier 2009; Cheng 2010). Finally, familial prac-
tices of intimacy within transnational households, including nurturing children
and maintaining ties to parents from a distance, have also received considerable attention (Gamburd 2000; Parreñas 2001a, 2005; Leinaweaver 2010; Chamberlain 2013). I draw on this vibrant scholarship around gender and migration to show how mobile lives extending between Istanbul and the former Soviet Union are intertwined with new forms of “intimate practices,” and sometimes reworked gender ideals, connecting parents, children, lovers, and households across this region of Eurasia.

Intimacy

I use the term “intimacy” as a nexus for several types of experience that are often elided in discussions of migration. The “intimate” is a realm broad enough to encompass relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, temporary migrants and their close friends and boyfriends, the realm of domestic household space, and the sense of belonging that was lost with the end of the Soviet Union and the region’s insertion into a global economy. I argue that the terms “intimacy” and “the intimate” helpfully demarcate an affective sense, one that is shaped by the forms of mobility men and women in this region have been engaging in since the end of the Soviet Union. The term “intimacy” is inclusive enough to help bridge structural shifts facing people like labor migrants out of the former Soviet Union and also the personal, often emotional negotiations these same people are caught up in. As Ara Wilson notes, “The turn to intimacy speaks to scholars’ desire for a flexible term that allows new descriptions that do not reify nation, identity, family” (2012, 46). Like Wilson, I use the term “intimacy” because it allows us to avoid separating “the economy” from “the private”; thinking in terms of “intimate economies” emphasizes how the lines between market/public space and private space are intertwined. This emphasis on intimate practices allows me to portray the realm of emotion, a personally experienced state, in conjunction with affect, a collective state (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2010; Pedwell and Whitehead 2012) that is shaped by and sometimes in tension with prevailing structural forces, such as neocapitalism or state socialism. Moreover, thinking about emotion and affect together creates a productive analytical tension. After all, with transnational mobility as such a central aspect of social experience globally, individual people are confronting the ways their emotional selves do not always fit with the collective “structures of feeling” (Williams 1977) they encounter. This is especially the case for post-Soviet migrants as “people on the move” or mobile, transnational populations who have experienced a radical change in their intimate lives, where barely a generation ago they could rely on stable state structures to support public institutions, households, and some coherent sense of well-being.
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STRUCTURES OF FEELING AND EMOTION WORK

There is relatively little written explicitly about the structures of feeling that defined individual experiences of state socialism (although see Paxson 2005; Yurchak 2003) or the new structures of feeling that are defining gendered practices in this region of Eurasia, and it is even more rare for scholarship to examine the intersection of emotions, intimacy, and mobility in the region. This is especially striking given the widespread personal trauma brought about by loss of employment, redrawn political borders, and related physical dislocation that the end of the Soviet Union caused for millions of people (IOM 2002). In thinking about emotions as defined in specific ways by political or cultural formations (Reddy 1999, 271), it is worth considering how people experience their insertion into a global economy, including as subjects of a new hegemonic project or as a form of liberation that they take part in crafting.

The concept of “emotional labor,” what Arlie Hochschild has defined as “the management of feeling” (1983, 7), provides us with a way of reflecting on the experiences of post-Soviet migrant women in Turkey. Like other work on emotional labor, often focused on people who are disenfranchised or disempowered through capitalist processes, I consider post-Soviet women migrants as a group of people who are learning to “manage” their feelings to fit with the new realities of their labor. Nevertheless, I consider the ways in which emotional labor is not just required by new structures of global capitalism but also something migrants are actively participating in, and sometimes strategically making use of, as they rework gendered structures within households and sometimes mobilize intimacy to their advantage, as some entertainers I met did in capitalizing on perceptions of them as “without hang-ups” about sex. Overall, similar to a long tradition in anthropology, I argue that paying attention to emotions and emotion work can shed light on how people are experiencing shifting forms of power (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, 2–3) under global capitalism in this region of Eurasia.

SEX WORK AND INTIMACY: BEYOND TRAFFICKING

When discussing my project on post-Soviet women’s labor migration, people inevitably asked me about the issue of trafficking. Scholarly work and popular media focused on women’s mobility in this region of Eurasia have frequently equated it with trafficking. Even though international law defines trafficking as labor exploitation (not prostitution), based on force, fraud, or coercion of any person (and not just women), dominant discourses have tended to associate all women’s migration with dangerous practices of “prostitution” and related sexual services and directly equate these with the trafficking in women. Blanket assumptions of “exploitation” have come to define popular understandings of women’s migration and drown out other forms of analysis, including around
the emotion work of providing sexual services, intimate ties to households, or the structural inequalities in home communities that might compel women to become migrants. Portrayals of human trafficking, often focused exclusively on women and revolving around an opposition of “forced” versus “voluntary” migration, as well as a conflation of all forms of sex work with trafficking, have circulated widely since the early 2000s (IOM 2002; Angel Coalition 2009; CATW 2011). These portrayals of trafficking often feature “rescue narratives” that would lead us to believe that there are tens of thousands of women from the FSU and Eastern Europe alone who are waiting to be “saved” from the deplorable conditions in which they find themselves as migrants engaged in sex work (see Soderlund 2005). While such narratives slide over the fact that women do not necessarily seek to be “saved,” nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs), feature films and documentaries with titles like The Price of Sex (2011) and Trafficking Cinderella (2001) continue to perpetuate images of naive women victimized by criminals. Without a doubt it is deplorable if even one person is trafficked, and these injustices deserve our outrage and efforts to address the problem. Nevertheless, I am wary of how the idea of trafficking, and especially a focus on trafficking in women, can so easily dominate discussions of labor migration. As part of the growing concern for “security,” discourses on trafficking both derail nuanced understandings of the links between global capitalism and women’s and men’s migration and justify increased policing of borders and expanding punitive powers of the state (Agustin 2006; Cheng and Kim 2014; Bernstein 2012).

In some ways this situation is not all that different from the historical roots of the concept of “trafficking,” generally located in the late Victorian era, when racial hierarchies paired with ideals of class and sexual propriety for women coincided with new forms of mobility. At the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, when there were widespread migrations of both men and women out of Europe, the mobility of phenotypically “white” women led to a concern around “white slavery,” a concern that was rearticulated by the League of Nations in 1927 as “Trafficking in Women and Children” (Doezema 1999; Kempadoo 2005; Gorman 2008). A number of academic and literary sources make reference to East European migrant women working as prostitutes, hostesses, and performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pointing to the transnational flow of “Russian” women, including to Turkey, Manchuria, and South America, but also to anxiety about their mobility (Guy 1991; Mansel 1995, 398–400; Murakami 1997, 136; King 2014, 148–50). With the ultimate demise of the League of Nations and then the chaos of the Second World War, for decades the idea of “trafficking in women” became less urgent. It is striking how in the early 1990s, just as the Soviet Union was ending, economies across Eastern
Europe struggled to get reestablished, and a new wave of “white” women became mobile, a global discourse on “trafficking in women” reemerged.

Although Turkey’s porous borders began to attract the attention of the European Union (EU) as early as the mid-1990s, with discussions around conditions to be met for EU accession (İçduygu and Yükseker 2012), only in 2002 and 2003 did Turkey come under pressure to recognize “trafficking in humans” as an issue within its borders. At that time Turkey received a “provisional 2,” in the US State Department’s annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, a rating that threatened to affect Turkey’s favored trade status with the United States. Related to this assessment, in 2004 INGOs like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began to turn increasing attention to women on the move in the region, including into Turkey. One of IOM’s key campaigns to bring awareness to trafficking involved a double-sided pocket brochure printed in Russian, English, Moldovan, and Turkish that was strategically placed at airport arrivals providing an emergency number to call in case someone was trafficked or suspected of being trafficked. The entertainers I came to know were undaunted by the extensive media campaign that the IOM and other organizations were mounting to discourage young people from traveling to Turkey for work (Kirby 2004). They saw themselves as working hard under unfair conditions, but many spoke of preferring this kind of work to other options they had; moreover, most of the young women I met were completing second, third, or fourth contracts and were planning on returning to Turkey again soon, following a brief visit home.

Migrants I met aspired to traverse transnational borders, and sometimes intermediaries or employment brokers assisted them. Sometimes migrants were intercepted by state powers policing their entry into a country or looking to deport them for working illegally. These were all part of the stories they told about mobility and impediments to making a living. In writing about migrants’ lives I aim to strike a balance between an overly celebratory portrait of globalization—with a focus on unprecedented possibilities for people, commodities, finances, and ideas to traverse wide distances—and an overly ominous one—with criminal figures orchestrating trafficking in women. Both approaches too easily overlook the complicated experiences of people trying to make their way in a world as they face increasingly policed borders. I seek to provide an alternative to the widespread discourses on “trafficking” in women that tend to drown out the enormity of transformations brought about by the newly porous borders in Eurasia. Ultimately, I trace a tangible sense of the complex, “crisscrossed” transnational lives many migrants have managed to orchestrate, maintaining friendships, relationships to men, and ties to home communities without losing sight of the structural forces working against them.
Origins of the Project and Mobile Methods

Like most ethnographic projects, this one gradually emerged out of a combination of serendipity and a desire to understand a broad phenomenon. In June 2000 I was attending a conference in Istanbul when I learned of the extent of post-Soviet migrant presence in the city. At first I was not surprised to hear a constant stream of Russian in the hallways and lobby of the small hotel where I was staying near Taksim Square, an upscale tourist area and one of the prime entertainment districts of Istanbul; after all, Russian speakers like Zhenia were on the move in this region of the world. I was surprised, however, when I realized that all the Russian speakers at the hotel over those several days were young, mostly blonde women in their early twenties, and they did not appear to be budget travelers or on short-term business trips, but instead worked as entertainers.

I had a glimpse of the wider phenomenon of Russian speakers in Istanbul during a brief visit to Laleli, the “Russian” neighborhood at the edge of Aksaray, the garment district on the other side of the Golden Horn. As they did with others perceived to be from the former Soviet Union, touts approached me on the narrow cobblestone streets, calling out in sing-song voices in Russian, “Devushki, dublenki” (girls [look], fur coats) and “Parikmakherskaia, manikiury!” (beauty
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parlor, manicures!). These were their standard calls as they tried to lure the bustling, business-minded women traders from the former Soviet Union to pause and purchase a fur coat or update a hairstyle or manicure. These encounters sparked my thinking about the ways women from the FSU experienced being transnational labor migrants moving between a place of “failed” modernity (the former Soviet Union) and a place of increasingly contested modernity (Turkey), and more important, how these women migrants negotiated these lives stretching across transnational space.

In 2002 I was able to return to Istanbul to begin research among the Russian-speaking migrants traveling there. Olga, a shuttle trader I first met in 2001 at her boutique outside Moscow, introduced me to the intricacies of the Russian garment trade in Istanbul when she traveled there to purchase batches (serii) of dresses, pants, and shirts for resale back home. As I detail in chapter 2, over the course of a week Olga showed me her way of doing business; she maintained long-term contacts with wholesalers, and while she looked for goods that would

appeal to her Russian clients and negotiated deals with wholesalers, she also took
time to drink tea they offered her and greet suppliers she had come to depend
on. After Olga’s goods were assembled, she directed the touts, who moved goods
around the trade district by trolley or simply on their shoulders, to the cargo
company she had selected for their reputation of delivering goods safely and with
minimal import duty. At the cargo company office all the purchases for the day
were amalgamated into large sacks and secured with heavy duty packing tape,
each strip detached with a swift jab with a ballpoint pen.

One day, after taking a wrong turn from my hotel, I encountered a large group
of animated Russian-speaking women who were congregated on a street cor-
ner. Despite shopkeepers’ repeated attempts to prevent people from gathering,
including by calling the police, this intersection of two city streets was the central
gathering place for undocumented laborers from the former Soviet Union. Since
the late 1990s the intersection, at the edge of Laleli, has emerged as the infor-
mal “bus station” (avtopark or avtostantsiia), as migrants referred to it, where
minibuses come to drop off and pick up passengers destined for the FSU. The
minibuses travel to the relatively nearby countries of Moldova and Ukraine (via
Bulgaria and Romania), but migrants from other former Soviet regions also
gather here, especially on Sundays when many people have the day off from their
work as cleaners, caregivers, retail staff, and sometimes entertainers.
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That first day at the bus station two sisters, Ruzhena and Udara, identifying as Tatar and recently arrived from Uzbekistan, struck up a conversation with me. They told me of the hardships back home, of being swindled by a neighbor, and of being unable to support themselves as an engineer and physical therapist, respectively. Daily for two weeks I stood with these women and their fellow migrants from Belarus, Latvia, Moldova, and Kazakhstan, with whom they had loosely bonded, waiting for potential employers to approach with offers of work. I heard of challenges in forging new lives and hopes of breaking away from debt and many tragedies, while trying to maintain ties to children, parents, and sometimes husbands back home. Many migrants stayed in nearby women’s-only hostels for weeks on end while they waited to secure work. In between long days of waiting on the sidewalk for what they considered acceptable offers of employment to work na domu (for “live-in” positions, paying at least $250 per month for six-day weeks), they grappled with deep moral quandaries over bodily integrity and self-respect. One day while taking a tea break in the garden of the nearby Şehzade Mosque, a group of women I sat with vehemently tried to convince a fellow migrant that it was not worth selling her kidney to pay a debt back home in Moldova. On another occasion I joined one of my new acquaintances, who had not eaten a proper meal for two weeks, to take up the invitation for a modest lunch offered by one of the local shopkeepers. Afterwards I realized why my acquaintance had insisted that I join her; following our meal it was strongly intimated that we should sleep with our hosts, and my presence made it easier for my acquaintance to firmly decline.

These exchanges and interactions point to the sometimes desperate situations migrants confront in the face of dire poverty in the aftermath of the Soviet Union. These realities are, however, just one part of what migrants encounter. Migrant women introduced me to the novel cultural encounters produced when new forms of mobility bring together people whose imaginaries include the modernities defined by waning state socialism, on the one hand, and waning secular Kemalist principles, on the other. As relatively fluid borders bring about renewed interactions between people in this region, the emergence of an increasingly Islamist state in Turkey is often in tension with ideals of women’s financial independence, sexual freedom, and gender equality—central tenets for post-Soviet women labor migrants. Post-Soviet women’s presence in Turkey provides a window onto the implications of global capitalism for ideals about modernity, gender, and intimacy as former “empires” wane and new forms of global power emerge.

Mobile Methods Embodied

Research on migrants can be complicated to conduct, given the multitude of ties and structures influencing people on the move (Kearney 1995). Beginning
in the 1990s scholars began pointing to the need to portray our newly mobile world by employing “multi-sited” methods (Marcus 1995), and in many ways this has become so widely practiced by ethnographers as to become a truism. The abundance of scholarship employing multi-sited methods has taken a multitude of forms, including work spanning dispersed layers of international scientific inquiry (Zabusky 2007); within different “scales” of global-local connection, as in the layers of actors key to the environmental devastation and concomitant activism around Indonesian rainforests (Tsing 2004); or tracing the shifting post-colonial and post-Soviet forms of governance in northeast Asia through the eyes of elderly Sakhalin Korean migrants moving between Sakhalin, Russia, and South Korea (Lim 2016). In the case of migrants from the former Soviet Union, they have become quintessentially multi-sited as opportunities for employment have all but disappeared in many communities, especially the more rural ones, and post-Soviet people often maintain connections with members of their households, living and working long-term in two or more countries.

Even when a project is multi-sited, it is still grounded in specific places defined by indelible histories. The migrant women in this book came from a specific place, the FSU, inscribed with its own history, and they arrived in Turkey, and specifically Istanbul, with its own distinct history and cultural contours. Partly due to the concentration of southern Moldovan migrants working in Istanbul and partly due to ethnographic serendipity, two chapters (4 and 6) focus on southern Moldovans and the transnational ties they have maintained in Turkey and to relatives in Russia and back home in Moldova. The crux of the book is about migrants in Istanbul who, based on their lingua franca and shared history, I call “Russian speakers” or “post-Soviet” migrants, although some migrants also referred to their compatriots from the former Soviet Union as “Soviets” (sovetskie) or “ours” (svoi). The majority of chapters (1, 2, 3, and 5) portray how transnational mobility has shaped intimate practices among a wide range of women moving between countries of the former Soviet Union and Turkey. As I explore in chapter 1, these migrants arrived in a place that was not a tabula rasa for links between Turkey and the regions of the former Soviet Union but a place steeped in a history of interactions in this part of Eurasia.

Within hours of my becoming acquainted with the migrants gathered at the minibus stop in Laleli, women were urging me to write about how the end of the Soviet Union had ruined their lives. Udara and Ruzhena, the two women I met from Uzbekistan, pressed me to get their words down in my notebook, saying, “We lived like people, and now we live like dogs.” Others interjected, “The end of the Soviet Union was absolutely devastating! Look how we live now! What a tragedy!” Women frequently mistook me for a journalist, and although I corrected them, I did agree to their requests that I document something of their lives. I promised to tell the story of their hardships and how the end of the Soviet
Union meant a collapse of a secure life and a life now defined by precarity. In some ways women I met saw me as a resource, one that might help them to immigrate to Canada or deliver personal gifts to their families or friends. They also quickly assessed that my knowledge of English might be a valued commodity. A few times migrants referred affluent Turkish women to me when they came to the minibus stop seeking to employ domestic workers and then thought they might also secure a low-cost English tutor for their children; I politely declined these invitations.

Post-Soviet migrants were generally very willing to speak with me, but my research was sometimes hindered by other logistical matters. It was easy to make contact with migrants in the many wholesale garment businesses in Laleli, but maintaining ties could be challenging. Women frequently kept jobs for short periods of time, leaving when their employers proved to be abusive, when a better opportunity came along, or when they were needed at home, and this made it difficult to locate women at places of work. Furthermore, cell phone numbers changed regularly, especially after 2006 when Turkey began requiring official Turkish identification in order to register phones for service (Consulate General of Turkey 2012). Migrants themselves were aware of these difficulties in maintaining contact so they usually shared both their cell phone numbers in Turkey and their numbers and addresses back home, resources I have regularly turned to when seeking to locate a person I had originally met in Istanbul.

When I first began research in Istanbul in 2002, few migrants had cell phones and on their days off women would line up, phone cards in hand, at the banks of public payphones to make weekly calls home. Just two years later, cell phones had become ubiquitous. By 2011 the banks of phone booths occupying large spaces at the edges of public squares in Laleli, Taksim, and the pedestrian zone of Istaklal Caddesi were usually empty. Today low-cost international phone plans allow migrants to text family and friends many times a day, and since 2009 or so it has become common for migrants to maintain connections home via frequent Skype calls on their own or a friend’s laptop. Although early in my research I sometimes corresponded with people by surface mail, in more recent years we have stayed in touch via e-mail, Skype, WhatsApp, or text messaging. Ultimately, for more than ten years I was generously folded into the lives of six households, primarily based in Moldova—with ties extending to Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Great Britain, and Turkey. I also came to know a wide array of other migrant women during my fifteen months of fieldwork, each stint lasting from three weeks to six months and overall spanning more than a decade (2001 to 2011).

When the women I came to know at the bus station in 2002 gradually located work, I began spending more time in the wholesale apparel shops, meeting women who worked as translators and shop assistants for the almost exclusively
male-owned and -operated businesses. These women—mostly from the former Soviet Union and especially Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus—spent many hours with me over tea breaks speaking of their lives. Over the course of the research one woman in her late forties, Maria, frequently invited me and my daughter, and sometimes also my mother, home on her one day off each week for sumptuous meals that invariably included Maria’s signature stuffed peppers; Maria’s Turkish husband also enjoyed showcasing his collection of racing pigeons kept on his rooftop. Shop assistants like Maria taught me how women living as long-term labor migrants move fluidly between different spheres of work in Laleli and beyond, sometimes selling apparel to shuttle traders but at other times working as domestics, cleaning or providing child care, doing manicures and pedicures in the hair salons staffed by Turkish men, or selling gold jewelry at stores that were popular both with tourists from across the Middle East and with post-Soviet shuttle traders. Migrant women also taught me about the intimate ties they maintain with family, friends, and often with Turkish men.

Finally, I began learning about the lives of younger migrants following one of those moments of serendipity treasured in ethnographic research. In the hotel where I was staying I met Zina, a former movie projectionist and medical orderly from southern Moldova, who took time following her demanding work cleaning the hotel to share a cup of tea. Zina was enthusiastic about my project and in addition to the many introductions she later made for me to shops’ assistants and her family and network in southern Moldova, she kindly agreed to introduce me to a number of dancers. As I explore in chapter 5, these women made a living as entertainers, something they widely embraced as glamorous, and they considered domestic work and jobs as shop assistants to be unappealing. Although the traders sometimes expressed a sense of shame about being involved in petty capitalist practices, a subject I explore in chapter 2, the entertainers did not express any such sense of shame. They dreamed of accumulating sufficient capital to become self-sufficient as entrepreneurs, with many of them aspiring to buy apartments back home and some aiming to become shuttle traders with their own boutiques supplied with apparel sourced in Istanbul.

On a steaming hot summer day in June 2002, when I first spent time in Laleli learning about shuttle traders from Olga, I also met Bella at the edge of the minibus lot. My first impression of Bella was that she was high energy and loquacious. Like most post-Soviet migrant women I met in Istanbul, Bella was woefully underemployed, with no job prospects, either in Moldova or Turkey, related to her degree in civil engineering. By keeping in touch and periodically meeting over the years, Bella’s perspective on being a transnational migrant moving between Istanbul, southern Moldova, Romania, and Moscow has deeply informed this project.
In my fieldwork in the summer of 2003, one of my key aims was to trace the connections between those migrants I had met who were sending remittances home from Istanbul and their households in Moldova and Russia. Zina agreed with Bella that it was essential for me to travel to their hometown of Vulcănești, located in southern Moldova in the region of Gagauzia, to better understand what compelled women to leave for work in Istanbul. I was accompanied by my five-month-old daughter, as well as by my stepmother, who had generously offered to facilitate my research by caring for her granddaughter, and although we stayed with Bella, who was home briefly that summer, Zina insisted that we also meet her sister, Eva. Zina was sure that Eva would be very happy to discuss her experience of spending years raising her niece and nephew while their mother, Zina, was working in Istanbul. Within a few hours of arriving in Vulcănești we made arrangements to meet Eva at her small farm, just a twenty-minute walk from Bella’s apartment, on the other side of the town center. As we made our way through the summer heat and dusty streets, my daughter began to fidget and squirm about in the Baby Bjorn strapped on to my torso. By the time we arrived she was shrieking, bringing to life my nightmare of what could happen during fieldwork with a child. I apologized profusely to Eva while my stepmother tried to console my daughter; Eva remained completely calm and, drawing on her knowledge as a midwife and herbalist, inquired what my daughter was eating. When Eva learned that we had recently tried feeding my daughter baby cereal, she pronounced gas as the culprit, and she gently massaged my daughter’s abdomen, very quickly calming her.

During our stay in Vulcănești Bella also introduced me to Nelli, a woman in her early fifties who was caring for her granddaughter while Nelli’s daughter, Niki, worked in Istanbul. The following year when I returned with my daughter and her grandmother to live for nearly two months with Eva and her family, I also spent considerable time with Nelli. Over several subsequent summers I returned to Vulcănești unaccompanied by family, but the first extended stay was especially important.

Conducting fieldwork with a young child had implications for the research in terms of how I was received, my attention to transnational nurturing practices, and the daily rhythm of doing fieldwork. Being immediately identified as a daughter as well as a mother significantly helped me to build rapport. I was often received with a widespread sense of empathy, with people helping with day-care arrangements, including obtaining the necessary vaccination records for enrollment, or in the first cold weeks of our late-spring stay in 2004, with finding warm clothing for my daughter. Instead of simply being a researcher of indeterminate standing who claimed to be a professor and married with a husband back home in Canada, I could be placed within a very familiar universe of middle-aged
women drawing on family ties to provide for households; I could also be seen not just as a researcher but as a person with the same types of day-to-day responsibilities (such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children) many of my interlocutors faced. “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” might not have contained the local content used to distract a child, but after weeks of hearing me desperately trying to soothe my tired daughter by singing this tune as I walked along the dusty (or muddy) road home, people could recognize the form. Also, having a young child who was still breastfeeding in the field meant that my schedule was not entirely my own. A “good” fieldworker tries to take up any and all opportunities to get to know their fieldsite, in this case by helping with agricultural labor, attending religious services, drinking tea with neighbors, taking part in cooking and general housework, going on local fishing trips with multigenerational groups, or stopping by the local pub. I did do a bit of all these, but my daily schedule—when I woke, when I left and returned home, whether I went out at night, and how much I slept—was circumscribed by my efforts to also be a mother, albeit with invaluable, caregiving support, what some scholars have called “othermothering” (Collins 1990, 119–23). As for all researchers, my data is shaped by my specific subjectivities.

After her sojourns with me in Moldova, at four years of age my daughter joined me again for nearly six months of fieldwork in Istanbul in 2007; on a daily basis she was lovingly cared for first by my mother and then by Turkish government preschool teachers and babysitters. I was fortunate to have such support, enabling me to spend long hours with migrant women after their work or sometimes to accompany them to the clubs, stores, or homes and establishments where they were employed. My daughter’s constant presence opened many doors, including for priority line-ups at airports and unusually attentive service in cafes, but most important she interacted with my interlocutors and drew them to reflect on their own children or grandchildren. In some cases my daughter also provided a strong excuse for me to leave a nightclub research site before 1:00 a.m. (to relieve the babysitter). Mostly, having a child along during the research, and toward the end of the project having two children waiting for me at home, humanized me for the women with whom I interacted.

Other aspects of how I was perceived were also key in shaping this project. As a non-native Russian speaker who, nonetheless, has often passed as “Slavic” and has conducted research and lived among Russian speakers since just before the end of the Soviet Union, it was common for Russian speakers to mistake me for a fellow migrant. Most often, based on my accent in Russian, they mistook me as being from one of the Baltic states of Latvia or Estonia. Even when early on I made sure to correct the misrecognition, Russian speakers also generously took me to be one of their “own” (svoi), and for the most part they readily
spoke with me. Nevertheless, this misrecognition did not unequivocally work in my favor; even after explaining my research, women engaged in the garment trade sometimes viewed me as a possible competitor who might try to learn the best sources for garments and then undercut the retail prices in businesses back home. In these instances, understandably, women were less willing to be drawn into conversation.

Another instance of misrecognition, one tied to competition for souls instead of goods, occurred after I completed an interview with Polina, a woman from Ukraine, at the apartment she shared with her Turkish boyfriend in Istanbul. Polina suggested we exchange Skype IDs so we could keep in touch. When we turned on her laptop and opened Skype, her brother immediately Skyped in from the northern Russian city of Surgut, where he and his family were working on the then booming oil fields that were attracting migrants from across the former Soviet Union. Before Polina had a chance to explain my research, Polina’s brother and his wife asked if I was on a “mission” (миссия). Such misrecognition of anthropologists as missionaries is itself not that uncommon (see Berlinski 2007); in this case the assumption was informed by the massive influx of missionaries into the FSU since the early 1990s, a subject I discuss in chapter 3.

In a less common instance of misrecognition, in particular neighborhoods I was perceived as a woman who might be offering sexual services. Several times when I was walking with one of the entertainers I came to know in Taksim, and other times in Eminönü, near the Galata Bridge, a cab driver called out aggressively to us, “Hey Aksaray!” referring to the garment district where Russian speakers and other migrants are especially visible. When I stayed in a favorite hotel in Laleli, right next to Aksaray, at different times during this research, it was common for hotel staff and shopkeepers to banter with me in a nonaggressive, flirtatious manner. In one unusual encounter at the minibus station, after I inquired in Russian about a minibus to Moldova, the Moldovan driver selling tickets glanced at my ringless hand and bluntly suggested that we go to a nearby hotel. As these experiences suggest, the idea of sexual availability was strongly associated with the “Russian” district, both by Turks and others in Istanbul.

Receptions of me also depended to some degree on the class background of those whom I encountered. In initial interactions with well-educated Turks and post-Soviet professionals (not labor migrants), a different type of misreading sometimes occurred wherein they would assume that my aims as a researcher revolved around saving women from the dangers of trafficking. In contrast, a working-class neighbor in my apartment building in Istanbul or a teacher at my daughter’s preschool was more likely to engage me in discussions about how sad it was for so many women to leave their families to work in Turkey. In social encounters when my research was not discussed, as in the thriving artistic scene in Beyoğlu along
Istaklal Caddesi or at the Şişli organic farmers market, I was most easily lumped together with the thousands of other expatriates living years on end in Istanbul, either for official work contracts or as foreign students. 40

My research took place in three locations: Vulcănești, an agricultural town in the Gagauz region of southern Moldova and the site of severe out-migration to Turkey and Russia; Moscow, a destination for post-Soviet labor migration but also a primary departure point for small-scale traders in the garment business; and Istanbul. In Istanbul, the primary site for the project, I conducted research among two generations of post-Soviet women migrants (one cohort of women in their twenties and early thirties, and one in their early Forties to late Fifties). In addition to carrying out more than fifty semistructured interviews and doing participant observation at places of work, in public spaces, and at people’s homes, I documented extensive life histories of twenty women working in different spheres, tracing their search for work, their efforts to support households, and their professional and personal aspirations.

To understand the transnational linkages migrants maintain and how labor migration shapes communities in Moldova and Russia, I drew on participant observation and semistructured interviews with family members of migrants working in Turkey, as well as with people considering migrating to Turkey or elsewhere. This part of the research focused on three households in Moldova, where women such as those I came to know in Istanbul are absent for years on end, and on three households in Russia, where women traders are frequently absent from home as well as being the primary breadwinners. In addition, in Moldova I met with migration scholars, spoke with staff in local libraries, museums, and vital statistics offices, and conducted formal interviews with school teachers and principals about the ways families are shaped by outmigration from southern Moldova.

The book weaves in and out of the lives and intimate relationships of five key women—Maria, Niki, Irina, Zina, and Bella—and their families. Two of the women worked closely with the garment trade for nearly twenty years, two have predominantly found employment as domestics, and one worked as an entertainer for nearly ten years. These women’s accounts form the center of what follows, although the experiences of tens of other women—including Raia, Olga, Ania, Nelli, Eva, Kara, Nadia, Anna, and Polina—and their families also contribute to this story of how intimacy and mobility have intersected in the flow of migrants between the former Soviet Union and Turkey.