MATERIAL CULTURE AND BRICOLAGE: RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MIGRANTS IN JAPAN WHO MAKE AND PROCURE OBJECTS

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Abstract: This paper draws on data obtained through fieldwork with first-generation Russian female migrants and an online survey of male and female Russian-speaking migrants who reside in Japan. The research focuses on the migrants’ material culture, in particular the objects that result from their ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) practices. I expand the traditional definition of DIY: for example, I extend the definition to include items modified to meet their owners’ needs, thereby retaining the features of co-making, as well as items obtained outside the conventional consumer experience. Uprooted from their familiar socio-cultural environment characterised by specific forms of material expression, migrants use DIY as a tool to restore this materiality in their new location, while having to rely on limited materials and specific consumption channels. In the study, these practices are approached through the concept of bricolage, which originates from Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological writings, to reveal the meanings enacted through the objects that the migrants possess.

Keywords: material culture, Russian-speaking migrants, bricolage, ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY).


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Introduction

Between 2008 and 2011 when I first conducted fieldwork in Japan, focusing on Russian women, their material culture was not my primary concern. Yet every time I visited my informants’ homes and observed the objects contained in them, I realised this was a subject that deserved particular attention. I concluded this because the informants were keen to discuss the objects in their possession, and because exploring those objects enabled me to look deeper into the migrants’ material worlds and their underlying contexts. Since then, I have observed the following items in the homes of my informants or worn on their bodies: cushions; cloth centrepieces; clothes made using Japanese kimono parts; hand-embroidered icons and hand-sewn curtains; tulle curtains, often resembling common designs in the owner’s home country and purchased at a recycling shop and further modified; and objects unusual for Japanese interiors but in fact discovered by my informants in Japan, often at flea markets or in online buy-sell groups.

The subject of this paper is material culture that is in some respect self-created by migrants. I use the term ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) when discussing...
the items outlined above and the practices that pertain to their making and procuring. I do not limit my application of the term ‘DIYed’ to items that are entirely hand-made. I argue that features of co-making (hence still DIY) are retained by objects that are modified to meet their owners’ needs. Therefore, DIY features are often evident in items obtained in ways that bypass mainstream consumer practices in a contemporary society, such as buying a ready-made item over the counter or online. An example of the usage of ‘DIY’ in this paper is as follows: an item is bought through a channel such as an online buy-sell group for migrants in Japan, where extensive communication on a private level is required until the transaction is made; such items are sometimes in need of further adjustments, often entailing the addition of extra materials, to fit into the domestic space of the purchaser. I suggest that these practices can be conceptualised through bricolage.

Lévi-Strauss defined bricolage as being spontaneous rather than having a definite project in mind; it is a process of creation that relies on any available means. The metaphor was used by Lévi-Strauss to characterise the process of myth-making, but here I apply it to the material world. I focus on a few features of bricolage as detailed through previous studies, such as constraints, the organising socio-cultural logic, and resistance. If we look at the limitations the makers experience, the organising forces behind their projects and the elements of resistance, we can come closer to answering the question of why one particular — rather than another — object appears in a migrant’s home, and what meaning it acquires once in possession of its holder. Further, applying the concept of bricolage can help us to dissect the emotional content of the objects as the locators of feelings, anxieties, and aspirations the migrants experience.

Theorising migration, materiality, and bricolage

(a) Materiality and migration

Studies that address the experiences of modern-day migrants through the lens of materiality often succeed in unveiling the subtlest intricacies of the migrants’ conceptions of life, identity construction, and aspirations. Such studies highlight the importance of observing material culture. In this section, I review earlier studies concerned with migration and materiality. I then look at recent studies that have adopted the concept of bricolage.

Basu and Coleman point out that to achieve a better understanding of the interconnected nature of migration and objects, a ‘mapping of typologies of materiality and material culture onto typologies of migration and mobility’ [Basu, Coleman 2008: 318] is needed. One possible way of tackling such an enormous task is to be conscious
of the contextual nature of migrants’ material worlds. To distinguish between contexts of various types in migratory experiences, one should be aware of the ‘intersecting itineraries of people and things’. The materiality of people who migrate is shaped by the purposes and agendas of their journeys, and vice versa [Basu, Coleman 2008: 317]. Although the precision of a certain material object seems undeniable, its connotations change dramatically according to the context of the journey. Therefore, contextuality is one of the most important frameworks when discussing migration and objects.

The study by De Leon [De Leon 2013] emerges as a concrete example of how the context can predetermine the modes of materiality in migration. De Leon’s account described the experiences of undocumented migrants, whose journeys are dangerous and physically demanding because of border-crossing contextualised by their illegal status. De Leon builds a discourse on the archaeological concept of ‘use wear’ that helps to investigate the material traces migrants leave behind. The author demonstrates the extent of physical suffering the migrants experience during their journeys, with shelters as their temporary homes. De Leon establishes a connection between the migrants, objects defining and defined by their migratory experiences, and the routes they take. The context helps to reveal the deeper levels of the migrants’ engagement with the objects, introducing a component of emotion that is projected onto the objects the migrants interact with. As Burrell [Burrell 2008: 356] states, journeys are ‘so emotionally significant, sometimes the only way to cope with them is to try to render them as such’ [italics mine. — K.G.].

The theme of migrants’ emotions in the form of suffering as seen through material culture also occurs in the work by Miller [Miller 2008], although in a different light. Miller analyses their suffering as a tragedy in the more abstract (yet overwhelming) sense that goes beyond the immediate physicality of a border-crossing action. In his overview of series of projects and papers dedicated to the concept of migration and materiality, Miller suggests that a sense of lack of fulfilment or completeness, as seen in the migrants’ contradictory material worlds, reveals their failure to exercise their agency and realise their cultural aspirations as effectively as they could have done in their native environment. Miller’s paper also touches on the topic of a ‘second home’ through the account of a Jamaican woman who lives in the UK but generously invests in her home in Jamaica, where she might never live. The theme was developed by the author in greater detail in the essay ‘Why the Furniture Goes to the House You Can’t Live In’ [Miller 2007].

This duality of homes is beyond the scope of my focus. However, I wish to acknowledge it as an important aspect related to material culture and cross-border mobility, which surfaces most vividly in contexts such as return migration [Horst 2007; Larionescu 2012]. A considerable number of my
These studies suggest that at least two important aspects must be kept in mind when dealing with migrants’ objects. These aspects are, first, the contextuality of the objects — from their physical (re)location, to the categories of status or life stage of the holder; and second, the emotional tensions they might represent. These contexts and tensions remain to be ‘embedded in the materiality’ of migration, realised through various types of ‘furnishings’ that migrants adopt [Burrell 2008: 370] for the various parts or stages of their migration. The parts of migration include initial border-crossing or visits home, and the stages include acquiring permanent residency.

Among recent studies on material culture and Russian-speaking migrants are works by Gurova [Gurova 2013] and Pechurina [Pechurina 2015]. Gurova [Gurova 2013] discusses the ‘style repertoires’ of Russians in Finland. This study explored the idea of what it means to ‘look Russian’ and how the migrants construct their ethnicity through various ‘style repertoires’ and ‘through clothes in the contexts of status, occupation, gender, and age’. Pechurina [Pechurina 2015] was similarly concerned with migrant identity and uses the concept of ‘diasporic objects’ to look for markers of ‘Russianness’ in the objects within her informants’ homes as well as in their food practices. Finally, the work by Byford [Byford 2014] although focused on the community-building of Russian-speaking migrants in the UK rather than on their material culture, shows how an arsenal of symbolic objects is employed by the migrants in the process of ‘performing the community’. The common feature across these studies is their engagement with how ‘being Russian away from Russia’ is articulated in the migrants’ material practices. I similarly touch on the meaning of this experience later in this paper when explaining the findings.

(b) Bricolage

Since its adoption by Lévi-Strauss, the concept of bricolage has undergone a long process of transformation. The earlier examples of the concept’s application in academia focused on its constraining nature, as an element of fabrication rather than creativeness. An example is Garvey’s discussion of constitutional bricolage where he argues that ‘bricolage’ is a process of fabricating “make-do” solutions to problems as they arise, using a limited and often severely limiting store of doctrines, materials, and tools’ [Garvey 1971: 5]. For Garvey, an important function of bricolage is to help society ‘maintain its syntax — its consistency and identity over time.
by selecting responses to problems as they arise from a limited cultural reserve’ [Garvey 1971: 5].

Altglas [Altglas 2014] argues that in the process of the subsequent ‘de-traditionalisation’ of the concept of bricolage, creativeness, devoid of an organising logic, has been put forward as the constituting principle. Altglas suggests that such an oversimplification of bricolage, as it applies to various realities, leads to a failure to grasp the range of forces responsible for individual practices. She advocates instead a reclaiming of the term’s initial meaning that stressed such features as ‘the boundaries of available resources, the pre-constraints of these resources in relation to meaning, the socio-cultural logics that organise bricolage, the role played by bricolage in uneven social relations and asymmetric wider cultural flows’ [Ibid.: 490]. Altglas illustrates the argument by drawing on an example from religious practices of modern-day believers, who may adhere to a few spiritual systems at once — showing that it is not just a matter of random choice but rather a reaction to the demands of a neoliberal society, which expects certain qualities from an individual. Indeed, the spiritual systems foster such personal qualities. Thus, the actors’ bricolage is bricolage not because it is eclectic but because, as initially envisaged by Lévi-Strauss, its eclecticism is social, predetermined, and operates from a limited range of resources.

Another feature of bricolage has gained attention in academic discourse: resistance. Knepper [Knepper 2006], exploring resistance as a strategy of bricolage in a colonial context, argues that ‘bricolage can be seen as the transformation of cultural disinheritance into a strategy of resistance, “re-membering”, and creative self-determination, but only through intensive critical and imaginative effort’ [Ibid.: 85]. Hence, although one’s ‘consistency and identity’ are not preserved through bricolage in the strict sense suggested by Garvey in 1971, the transformed identity is recreated using the initial components. Knepper’s [Ibid.] discussion also suggests that an outer force — the colonisers — underpins one’s bricolage. This outer force is further articulated in the study by Deuze [Deuze 2006], who sees bricolage (together with participation and remediation) as central to modern digital culture; it is exemplified by the open software movement, which also contains an element of resistance and plays a role in political citizenship.

Johnson [Johnson 2012: 368] states that Lévi-Strauss exposed ‘the figure of bricoleur as emblematic of the divergence between traditional and modern scientific modes of thinking and doing.’ This idea still stands; modern-day bricoleurs, as in the earlier example by Deuze [Deuze 2006], are divergent, aiming to overcome the imposed structures, and their bricolage is a statement. Similarly, bricolage emerges as a statement in the subcultural practices of soccer fans who
produce it through subversive use of clothing brands [Guțu 2015]. The author argues that for them, ‘bricolage has a role which is rather aimed at protecting the identity of the group from “outsiders”, to confer identity and recognition signs’ [Ibid.: 18].

Studies located in migrant contexts can help to explain whether the host culture and its dominant structures can be seen as an ‘outer force’ that invites resistance in the form of bricolage. As such, Phillimore et al. [Phillimore et al. 2016] explore the potential of bricolage as a conceptual tool to address access to welfare in superdiverse neighbourhoods. The authors state that ‘bricolage is seen as inherently innovative and in fact the only way to build and innovate in situations characterised by high uncertainty, risk adversity, lack of trust, political conflict, and resource shortage — in short bricolage is a mechanism for coping with complexity’ [Ibid.: 13]. In their suggested tactics for bricolage in welfare, the authors refer to the themes of ‘marginalised subjects’ and ‘resistance out of necessity’ [Ibid.: 16–7]. They do not specify the target of this resistance, but lay an important foundation for discussing bricolage as a coping mechanism in migrant contexts.

Methodology

This paper comprises data obtained during different stages of my research, using various methods. The first portion of data was gathered in Japan in 2008–11 through in-depth semistructured interviews with fifty Russian women who were married to Japanese men. The women had been born between 1970 and the 1980s and were twenty-four to forty-two years old at the time of the interview. They had lived in Japan for anything from six months to eighteen years. Among my respondents, 76% had a bachelor’s education, with 30% of the university graduates having further enrolled into graduate schools. At the time of the interviews 52% of them held some type of a job, although only five women out of the fifty worked full-time as regular employees. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed and coded; coding was initially done manually and later with NVivo. I also took extensive field notes.

1 The results of this PhD project are presented in my recently published book [Golovina 2017] (in Japanese).

2 Women were chosen as informants because of the demographic characteristics of Russians in Japan, with women prevailing. The so-called ‘female wave’, in which Russian women have moved to Japan, started in the 1990s. Often, marrying local men became a common feature, although some women relocated as hostesses or students. The collapse of the Soviet Union liberalised people’s geographical movement; this was followed by political and economic crisis in 1998 and 2008. The post-1990s migration of Russian women to Japan has been addressed from various perspectives, including identity [Baibikov 2006], migration policies [Mukhina 2013], agency and structure [Golovina 2017], Russian language maintenance [Basova 2013], and gender (see: [Kim 2013] on women moving from Russia and other former Soviet republics).
I have continued communicating with many of the participants, as well as new informants, for other projects until now as I have technically never left the field. In follow-up interviews I retested my initial hypotheses. These interviews also played an important role in terms of this study’s focus on materiality: they helped me to stay physically (and hence sensorily\(^1\)) involved. All the informants’ names have been changed to ensure their privacy.

To introduce a quantitative perspective to the study, in February 2016 I undertook an online survey in Russian, which was funded by the Japan Society of Lifology. I focused on the migrants’ dwellings, objects within the dwellings, and channels that the migrants employed to procure the items.\(^2\) The survey was carried out using paid survey tools and targeted members of the online group called ‘Russian-speaking community in Japan’, established just after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. This is a platform through which, at the time of the survey, over 7,500 Russian-speaking migrants from former Soviet republics were communicating. The fifty-five survey questions were finalised after I organised a round of discussions on relevant topics with the participants of this online community. These discussions constitute a cyber-ethnographic element of this study.

Structurally, the online survey consisted of two parts, divided into a series of subthemes. In the first part I aimed to establish the types of dwellings the Russian-speaking migrants inhabit in Japan. In the second part I wanted to determine the range of objects, from furniture to photographs, that can be found in those homes, as well as the ways these items came in their owners’ possession. In this paper I focus on the second part of the survey, particularly on a question related to procurement channels the migrants utilise to obtain various objects, where the elements of DIY can be traced.

My online survey gained responses from 186 people (69.9% from Russia\(^3\), 90.3% female, 69.9% ages 30–44 years, and 50.8% married to a Japanese citizen). Although my sample size was relatively small for a survey, participants’ demographics closely coincide with those of migrants from former Soviet republics in Japan. This group can be generalised as a ‘female migration’\(^4\) of women in their thirties to

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1 Pechurina [Pechurina 2015: 70–2; 2016] offers an extensive explanation of the role and importance of a sensory aspect in the research on material culture.


3 Other participants were from Ukraine (11.8%), Belorussia (4.3%), and Kyrgyz Republic (3.8%); and the rest hailed from other former Soviet republics.

4 Uzbekistan is an exception, as more men than women move from this country to Japan (Japan’s Ministry of Justice Statistics: <http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/List.do?lid=000001150236>, accessed September 2016).
forties, the initial relocation often having taken place in their twenties, with migrants from Russia occupying the largest proportion.\(^1\)

It is important to keep in mind that the generalised portrait of a migrant from former Soviet Union in Japan would be as follows: as seen both from the official statistics of Japan’s Ministry of Justice and the results of the survey, the migrant is most likely to be Russian, female, and married to a Japanese man. Therefore, the practices described in this paper should be viewed as characteristic of this type of migrant. The fact that the study focused on women migrants was primarily demographically predetermined.

My survey gained a higher number of responses by women (90.3%) compared with other surveys I have carried out as part of co-authored research projects [Mukhina, Golovina 2017]. This high female response rate suggests that the topic of material culture in migration might be of particular interest to women. Pechurina studied the reconstruction of traditional Russian styles in migrants’ homes in the UK, and similarly noticed that ‘a number of (mostly female) respondents’ were particularly active in home-décor practices [Pechurina 2015: 40]. Moreover, the active participation of women in my study can be compared to a trend noted by Morgunova [Morgunova 2014], who was part of a project on the Russophone e-diaspora. Morgunova states that the Russian-speaking women can be considered the most socio-culturally active participants among the Russian-speaking worldwide diaspora, both online and offline.

**Terminology**

I chose the specific online platform for my survey because of its status as the largest — and constantly growing — communication space for Russian-speaking migrants, the majority of whom are Russians, in Japan. Hence, unless I otherwise specify that a certain informant was from Russia, in this paper I use the term ‘Russian-speaking migrant’ to describe the research participants.

I do not use the word ‘community’ in this paper in a strict sense, in the way Breton [Breton 1964] suggests a true ethnic community as being one that has a degree of ‘institutional completeness’. I rather use the term to demarcate my respondents’ belonging to the shared online platform they use for socio-cultural and sometimes economic purposes. Many of this community’s members are ethnic Russians born either in Russia or other former Soviet republics; others belong to various ethnic groups that could be found throughout Russia and

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\(^1\) In December 2015 there were 13,890 migrants from former Soviet republics in Japan, 58% from Russia alone; 61.5% of them were women (Japan’s Ministry of Justice Statistics).
former Soviet territories. Their common feature is that they all speak Russian as their first language, or with native-like fluency.

As specified by Kopnina [Kopnina 2005] in her research, when migrants from former Soviet republics move to a location outside their homeland, they tend to form a shared identity. This identity is based on common socio-cultural values stemming from their countries’ socialist past as well as their ability to freely converse in Russian. Byford [Byford 2014] makes a similar observation about Russian-speaking migrants in the UK context, putting forward ‘the origin from the former Soviet “empire”’ as the driving force of self-identification, above ethnicity or nationality. Finally, in a pilot study on migrant youth from the former Soviet Union who went to Japan to further their studies, comparable conclusions are drawn [Golovina 2009]. The youth relied heavily on Soviet symbolism in communications between themselves in the host country.

**Self-reflexivity**

As mentioned earlier, Pechurina [Pechurina 2011; 2015] employs the concept of ‘Russianness’ as a lens through which to view the material culture of Russians in the UK. Pechurina investigated this Russianness through the notion of ‘diasporic objects’ such as the matryoshka. I also saw many items in the homes of my informants that could fit into the category of ‘diasporic objects’. However, a few key phrases from my encounters with informants suggested there may be other areas of inquiry.

After an interview with a 34-year-old professional woman, a Russian, where I had asked questions about the Russian elements of décor in her home, I received a comment from her through a messenger. She said: ‘Thinking about it, all these Russian things, it’s not about me’. I had felt a similar sentiment after interviewing other informants. I therefore decided to take as my point of departure the objects that the informants claimed were meaningful to them and the unusual practices of procurement I observed them engaging in, rather than a hypothesis that ‘Russianness’ should be an overarching constituent. In Pechurina’s account [Pechurina 2011; 2015], some migrants showed relatively little attachment to the ‘diasporic objects’ in their possession or in general. The researcher classified these migrants as ‘acceptors’ (of the British ways of life). The same author touches on the topic of kitsch: Russian, and more often Soviet, objects are considered vulgar. These two observations by Pechurina reveal that the relationship Russian migrants have with ‘Russianness’ is multifold. It does not necessarily emerge as a central motif in their lives. This finding suggests there may be other realms of the material culture of Russian-speaking migrants that need to be explored. I therefore decided to focus on what exceeded my research
expectations about the range of objects one might find in migrants’ homes: the items in the possession of my informants that were either made or co-made by them.

Cases and discussion

(a) Explaining the empirical findings

Before describing the empirical findings from my research, in this section I return to the definition of DIY adopted in this paper. I also further discuss the term ‘bricolage’ utilised here to conceptualise the findings in the migrant context.

The term DIY can be interpreted as a description of the state of things in a pre-consumerist society, a response to economic shortages such as the ones experienced by many countries in the twentieth century, and a reaction to the universalisation of objects in the context of the present-day consumerism. However, for migrants the term carries extra meaning. Displaced from a native socio-cultural context that is associated with certain forms of materiality, the migrants use DIY as a tool to restore this materiality in their new location despite having to rely on limited materials and specific consumption channels. The restoration process is not one-sided but is influenced by objects and ideas from the host culture. The migrants are driven by a mixture of socio-cultural impulses, which include curiosity about the host culture (or ignorance thereof); nostalgia¹ about their home country (or again, although much rarer, ignorance); assumptions about them as foreigners who are expected to be homesick;² and sometimes longing for one’s premigratory or early postmigratory excitement. With regard to the latter, a sense of excitement about the host country has usually since faded. Many of my informants reported that they were charmed by Japan at first but had later lost that feeling. The exotic nature of the host culture is often manifested through the kimono, which I discuss in this paper. Exoticism may initially play a role in determining the migrants’ increased engagement with materiality.

Bricolage means DIY in French, but the term is also invested with meanings drawn from the anthropological discourse. I use the word here — as mentioned in the Introduction — as a concept that contains the following meanings: the constraints of available materials, socio-cultural organising logic, and resistance. These meanings are described in earlier studies, referred to in section ‘Theorising

¹ See: [Pistrick 2015] for a discussion of nostalgia in the migrant context.
² In the Japanese context this is particularly true, as foreigners are rarely perceived in the public discourse as being long-term stayers. Television discourse about foreigners is constructed almost entirely so that foreigners are viewed as guests, and thus longing for one’s home country is an expected sentiment (see: ‘YOU ha nani shi ni nihon he?’ (‘Why did YOU come to Japan?’), shown by TVTOKYO).
migration, materiality, and bricolage’. In the migrant context, bricolage means that the materials available to people are limited, their actions are the result of socio-cultural forces beyond their immediate control, and the migrants’ relationship with the material practices of the host country are characterised by the presence of resistance. Not only are the objects made and procured by migrants the result of a compilation of resources and channels at hand, but they often also function as a symbolic means of reproducing pre-migratory experiences. This act is an attempt to construct an ‘as if’ feeling of being at home. The memory of these experiences, like Lévi-Straussian mythemes, becomes the arsenal of means that migrants use to express themselves through object-making processes. The bricolage is thus twofold. It occurs both at the level of past memories and at the level of physical resources that the migrants can obtain and channels they can access in the host country to materialise their experiences. The lack of vision of the final product on the part of its maker can be attributed to the unavailability or invisibility, within one’s immediate realm, of the sought-after objects and ideas.¹ Further, the eclecticism of bricolage reveals itself through the ultimate mixture of objects and means.

Despite the hybrid nature of the globalising world, in which cultures intermingle — albeit unequally — through various media sources [Kraidy 2005], host countries can emerge as uncharted territory for migrants. This situation reveals itself once a migrant has relocated physically. A lack of knowledge of the host country’s language adds to the problem. This is particularly the case when the written scripts differ from that of a migrant’s language, as in the case of Russian-speaking migrants in Japan. The question of gaining access to necessary resources (i.e. what, where, and how to buy things to make one’s life comfortable) while maintaining symbolic connections to the memories of the past emerges as a complicated issue. These practices contain elements of resistance; the migrants engage only with a certain aspect of the host culture and resist the rest. In addition, the practice of DIY means that the objects in one’s possession mount up. This scenario presents an opposition to the minimalist trend in Japan’s modern urban society.²

Thus, DIY — reframed here as bricolage — may be the migrants’ response to the unknown that faces them. It becomes their strategy to gradually fit in with the host society by means of finding objects

¹ In Lévi-Strauss’s description, one who engages in the act of bricolage ‘interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed to discover what each of them could “signify” and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize [italics mine. — K.G.]’ [Lévi-Strauss 1966: 18].

² See: [Roquet 2012: 144–55] on postindustrial Japan’s ‘aesthetics of less’, with reference to one of the country’s major household brands, Mujirushi, which promotes minimalism.
they can employ as new symbols of their belonging to both pre- and postmigratory worlds. These objects are sought out, selected, combined, modified, adjusted, and ultimately invested with new meaning. The holders of such items do not only contribute to these objects’ co-making but also to their ‘cultural biography’ [Kopytoff 1986] through obtaining, modifying, displaying and sometimes giving them away.

Romanticisation of the process of making and procuring of such objects should be avoided. In some cases, the practices referred to above prevail during certain stages of the migrants’ lives in Japan and are associated with a distinct status. These practices may lessen or even disappear completely under certain circumstances, such as the migrant being engaged in demanding full-time work. This argument links with the findings of Kopnina [Kopnina 2005: 206], who states that Russians living in London and Amsterdam stop procuring goods through ethnic communities and networking once they realise that western types of transactions are more straightforward and beneficial. I believe that this phenomenon has to do not only with the realisation of the usefulness of western approaches1 per se but also with the fact that the migrants ultimately reach a certain level of adaptation, a degree of familiarity with the host culture that makes such transitions possible. A migrant can adapt from being a bricoleur to someone who has a fuller arsenal of means of expression and clearer goals — or perhaps even an engineer, given his or her extraordinary powers to overcome nature [Johnson 2012].2

(b) Case 1: A tale of a fly

Mila was a mother in her late thirties who had two young children. At the time of my fieldwork she had just started contemplating running a small studio to teach performing arts to ethnic community members, a subject she had never learnt before. When I met her she was sitting at her kitchen table under the purple — with flecks of green — light of an art nouveau lantern. The motifs of the floor mosaics and the curtains were also art nouveau, revealing consistency in style. The table, covered by a lilac printed tablecloth, hosted a Gzhel3 tea set with strong Russian tea, chocolate cake, strawberries, and sugar.

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1 By ‘western’ I mean generally capitalistic rather than geographically bound to the West, since my discussion focuses on Japan.

2 [Guțu 2015: 6] discusses bricolage and consumerism among football supporters and makes a comparable observation: “experienced ultras”, once they receive the “recognition and security” of the group, no longer feel the need of identity legitimacy through visual style, but through performance’.

3 Gzhel is a distinctive type of Russian blue-and-white porcelain, often with retro-folksy patterns and shapes [Eds.].
I inquired about the origin of the items in her home, which seemed distinct from what could be readily obtained in the Japanese conventional stores. Mila said she bought most of the objects at the Japanese *risaikuru shoppu* (recycling shop): ‘real treasure islands, where household items, including china, are often new, but cost nothing.’ She insisted that I should accompany her to one of her favourite shops one day. While we continued our conversation, my gaze turned to a sugar container on the table; it was made of metal in the shape of a fly (Ill. 1). I expressed surprise when she told me that this unusual object, also resembling *art nouveau* style, ‘was found at this big recycling shop nearby and cost just a few hundred yen.’

We then embarked on a discussion of what that fly-shaped sugar-pot (*sakharnitsa* in Russian) meant to her. The discussion unearthed the theme of the 1923 children’s poem *Mukha-Tsokotukha* by Korney Chukovsky (1882–1969, Russian literary critic, writer and poet, particularly famous for his works about and for children), widely published in Russia to date and popularised through its several screen adaptations.1

One day I did accompany Mila to the *risaikuru shoppu* which she wanted to show me in western Tokyo. It was a spacious two-storied building with most shelves and racks occupied by various household items and clothes. We spent a few hours there walking among the aisles. I was expecting Mila to leave the shop with many purchases, given her excitement about the place, but she was carrying nothing when we met at the cashier. ‘They did not have anything *mine* today, you know,’ she explained.

The object that could potentially become ‘hers’ had to resonate with a set of ideas Mila had that day, which she could not articulate, yet had a sense of. These ideas, in combination with a limited range of items available at that shop on that particular day, worked as constraints, characteristic of bricolage, which meant a purchase did not happen. Things could easily have worked out differently to make a purchase happen, as was the case with many other items she already had at her home. Yet for her it was not about trying to visualise what she ultimately wanted and looking for it at other locations or even ordering it if necessary. The experience of finding what one does not exactly know in a place that can have anything and yet nothing was at the core of her actions. Mila said she ‘truly enjoyed such trips’, adding that she likes ‘the part of the Japanese culture that has a European scent to it’; she further mentioned old department stores

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1 Both *art nouveau*, the style that my informant came to cherish so dearly in Japan, and Chukovsky’s poem *Mukha-Tsokotukha* are invested with meanings of emancipated womanhood. In *Mukha-Tsokotukha*, a young unmarried fly with a hospitable home undergoes a series of gruesome experiences and is at last domesticated; however, she remains a symbol of the free spirit.
in Ginza\(^1\) as an example. Mila said that she liked to visit these department stores with their cool fragrant air and echo of tall ceilings. She did not make purchases there often, compared with the way she frequented second-hand shops, but in both cases it was the objects with their ‘European scent’ that she strove to find.

A few months passed before I went back to Mila’s house for another visit and interview. We sat at her table to drink tea. I reached for the fly-shaped sugar-pot, and Mila suddenly asked if I knew anyone who would appreciate having it. When I asked why she wanted to give it away, she answered:

*I sometimes do this, when I feel something has stayed with me long enough. This fly, it has served me well. Besides, friends with young kids visit us often, and it’s a heavy container, you know. I think it is ready to go somewhere else.*

At the time, I was just a week away from traveling to Russia. I suggested I would take it with me, knowing that my father, who collects antiques, would appreciate it. Mila was very happy that the fly was going to travel to Russia and stay with someone who could enjoy it. We had a laugh, with Mila saying, ‘The fly is going home.’ However, it had most likely been manufactured in Japan, a replica of *art nouveau* motifs. Thus, the object that had originally been purchased in Japan as something representing the European style of *art nouveau*, which Mila liked, was relocated to its symbolic home, Europe.

Mila’s practices are particularly interesting because her bricolage draws on the idea of her European belonging, which she found a way to reinforce through a certain style that was relatively accessible in Japan — although not in mainstream shops, unless at a high price. Thus, she co-acted with only that part of Japanese culture the imagery of which had developed under the influence of the West — thanks to Japan’s history of modernity. This part found an immediate response in her and she resisted the rest. Because she hailed from a city in the Russian Far East, she might not have had immediate access to modernistic designs and styles. Therefore, the ‘immediate response’ might not have been based on her actual experience but on her perception of the ways in which Europeanness\(^2\) is articulated

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\(^1\) See: [Tipton, Clark 2000] for further discussion on Japan’s department stores through the lens of modernity.

\(^2\) Interestingly, Europeanness emerges as a discourse of domination among Russian-speaking migrants in Israel [Shumsky 2004]. Lulle and Jurkane-Hobein [Lulle, Jurkane-Hobein 2016] also note Europeanness as an acquired identity among Russian-speaking migrants who relocate from Latvia to London. As such, Europeanness is understood and experienced differently depending on a range of factors, which include the migrant’s migration trajectory and status as well as the socio-cultural context in the host destination. In the case of Japan, this socio-cultural context is not only the linkage between Europeanness and modernity; it also relates to the legacy of Russian émigrés in the early twentieth
in Japan. By sending one of the items in her possession ‘back home’, she contributed to the item’s ‘eventful biography’ by means of multiplying the instances of its singularisation [Kopytoff 1986]. This perceived Europeanness, in turn, served as an organising principle for Mila, a way of adhering to the very style she chose from among many other styles she could have chosen in Japan, transforming her home into a space filled with its symbols.

(c) Case 2: Sewing used kimonos into new items

Lisa came to Japan to marry a man considerably older than herself after she had separated from her first husband in Russia. Being a professional tailor, Lisa quickly established a clientele within the ethnic community in Japan. The women asked her to make all kinds of alterations, from daily clothes to wedding dresses, hoping to transform the latter into cocktail outfits — and Lisa was taking care both of their orders and her young child. In addition she received many orders for hand-made household items, such as cushions or curtains, and women sometimes asked her to use fabrics brought from Russia. I visited her place on a few occasions and often saw pieces that she was working on. I noticed that rather than clothes that looked suited for daily wear, there were many unusual items that used asymmetric patterns and lengths, bold colours, and rich textures. There were also collars made of fur that Lisa was asked to adjust to clothing items despite the fur being too warm for the Japanese winter. Once, Lisa showed me a knee-length coat that she ‘just completed for this lady’, made of kimono sashes (obî). She said it was an emerging trend and a few of her customers had recently placed similar orders — for a clutch and a cushion (from a kimono sash) and a dress (from kimono itself). Lisa explained that the kimonos and sashes the ladies purchased for alterations were second-hand and were obtained at flea markets in Japan, and that it was a very difficult fabric to work with due to its original cut. She said that on a few occasions, her customers went to the used kimono shops together to seek better bargains. She added that ‘[t]he items, especially the sashes were very cheap, you can get one for as little as 1000 yen per piece, it is a real bargain.’

I was present when two women came to pick up their orders, made from kimono pieces; I interviewed one of the women on a separate occasion.¹ They were trying out their new outfits, commenting on each other’s style, praising Lisa’s work, discussing the events to which

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¹ All the women featured in this section were doing freelance work, such as tutoring, at the time of the interviews.
they were going to wear the clothes (a coat and a dress), drinking tea, and having fun. One of my informants shared with me that during one such gathering held in the Japanese home of another Russian seamstress, a poem was composed about a Russian woman who was draped in a dress made from kimono. The poem, in its original Russian version, is written in the literary style of translations of the Japanese classics. The poem read as follows, according to my translation into English:

Showers of stars have not obscured the tenderness of meadow,
Its reflection is in my comb,
Let the beloved one, early before dawn,
Free from it my tired locks...

(Collective authorship. Provided by I. K. in April 2015)

These practices are of interest as they act as a locality for their actors to test out their postmigratory identities through an array of tools and situations. A combination of Japanese materials and European sewing techniques, which result in European clothing that the women order from their Russian dressmaker in Japan, is in itself a powerful symbolic bricolage. The clothing is produced collectively and is an act of syncretism, with elements of the Japanese culture Russianised (or Europeanised) in the hands of a Russian tailor. While many of my informants who had married Japanese men had had the opportunity to try on a kimono at least once — usually for a wedding photoshoot — such elements of Japanese culture were absent from their daily practices. This absence was dictated both by their urban lifestyle and often by a lack of interest in traditional Japanese culture on the part of the women’s husbands. Kimono classes are available in Japan, but their most common variety is *kitsuke kyōshitsu*, where one is taught to put on a kimono but not to make one.

However, when my informants chose to perform a series of DIY tasks with a view to creating garments from second-hand kimonos, they co-created a ‘Japanese culture of their own’. These tasks included visiting a flea market, selecting a kimono piece they liked, contemplating the design, making multiple trips to their tailor, discussing the design with her, thinking of a special occasion on which they would wear the item (very often it was a single event), trying the outfit on, and conversing with their friends who were engaged in the same practices. The outcome was often a creative one that enhanced a romantic mood. The final moment of wearing the outfit might not be as important as the process leading up to it; in fact, the special

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1 ‘Zvezdopad ne zatmil nezhnost trav, / V moem grebne ikh otrazhenye, / Pust lyubimyy, eshche do rassveta, / Osvobodit ot nego moi ustalye volosy...’
event almost never came up in the interviews unless I specifically asked about it. This feature is coherent with bricolage, in which the final outcome is mostly a vague idea of how a combination of the materials and tools at hand could work out.

I argue that these practices are influenced not only by Japanese culture per se, materialised through kimono and other pieces the women buy at flea markets, but also by one’s initial premigratory fascination with the Japanese culture. Many of my informants recall reading Japanese literature in Russian translations prior to coming to Japan. This explains the literary style of the poem about a Russian woman; the poetic language is another fragment of this bricolage — a romantic sketch of a woman, dressed in an emerald western-style dress made from kimono. The language was used as a tool to verbalise their experience; the poem romanticised the marriage between a European woman and a Japanese man. Relying on a circumscribed spectrum of tools and relevant memories (predetermined by their life as migrants), the women who engaged in transforming kimono into new items resisted the mainstream culture. They did so through co-acting with only those elements that found an emotional response in them and investing the outcomes with emotions of nostalgia and romance. The nostalgia was for one’s own initial longing about Japan. As such, while they acted freely, their practices occurred within the realm of an organizing logic. The women were slowly undergoing the process of adaptation, both expected and unavoidable, by ‘re-membering’ [Knepper 2006: 85] what it meant for them to be migrants, wives, and women.

Online survey data

Part of my online survey asked questions about home interiors. These questions focused on items such as photographs, objects that make respondents feel at home, the ones they consider comforting, objects specifically brought from one’s homeland, ethnic objects, and so on. Here, I discuss the aspect of the survey that best illustrates the unfolding discussion: the migrants’ object world as seen through the procuring channels they utilise to obtain these items. Many of the procuring channels are themselves ‘DIYed’ or bear elements of DIY because they require one’s active participation in the process of procurement.

(a) Procurement channels

The survey question about procurement channels to obtain home interior items gained responses from 158 people. The question was ‘Where do you buy your interior items?’ For this question, multiple responses were possible, as shown in the table below.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procurement channels</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Department stores interior and design sections</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LOFT and Tokyu Hands</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Small designers’ shops</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Recycling shops</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Internet (amazon.co.jp, rakuten.co.jp, and other Japanese websites)</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Internet (foreign websites with delivery to Japan)</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Internet auctions</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Russian-speaking online community</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Websites for foreigners (Gaijinpot, Craiglist)</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Do not make purchases, DIY the items myself</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Other</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>379</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I am particularly interested in the procuring practices under response 4 (Recycling shops) and responses 7 to 10 (Internet auctions, Russian-speaking online community, websites for foreigners, and ‘do not make purchase, DIY the items myself’). I deem all these options as bearing elements of DIY. Features of co-making are retained by objects that are obtained in ways requiring actions that transcend mainstream consumer practices, and by objects that are modified to meet their owners’ needs. The procurement channels themselves are often created and maintained (hence DIYed) by the migrants.

Among the respondents, 8.9% DIYed their items. However, because multiple answers were possible for this question, they did not necessarily make their own items exclusively. One of the examples provided in the free answer field were curtains, made by the respondent from scratch; she identified her curtains as being the most ‘ethnic’ object in her home. A further 17.7% of the respondents said they purchased from recycling shops — a statistic that came to life in a description of objects contained in Mila’s home and manifested through the ‘eventful biography’ [Kopytoff 1986] of the fly-shaped sugar container. In the case of kimono-transforming practices, the items are bought at recycling shops that specialise in used kimonos, constituting an act of bricolage that unfolds to include the tailor and the customers who craft their identities through multilayered co-action.

Internet auctions were used by 5.1% of the respondents. One interviewee told me she often uses Yahoo Auction to purchase vintage
paintings and postcards, and she later orders matching frames for these (or less frequently hand-makes them) and decorates her home with these pictures. She said her most recent searches on Yahoo Auction included keywords such as ‘lilacs’, and that she was looking for paintings depicting this plant, rare for Japan. She explained that this flower, native to Europe, ‘spoke to her heart’ as a reminder of the scenery in her homeland.

Many respondents mentioned that purchasing through websites such as Gaijinpot and Craigslist (4.4% in this survey) is a convenient and budget-friendly way to obtain original items. While most of the references in this category related to furniture, the websites were praised by the respondents because they contained items that foreigners living in Japan might enjoy, such as comfortable armchairs made of leather, carpets, and antique cabinets. The websites also listed household items that were being given away for free. These items may be appealing as they relate to the European notion of comfort at home; an armchair is absent from a Japanese traditional home. They also relate to the sentiment of exoticism when antique Japanese items are traded. The element of nostalgia is also important; the popularity of recycling shops among the migrants suggests that those shops provide a wider range of items that can satisfy this emotion, rather than the ready-made items obtainable at mainstream stores.

Finally, a few respondents (1.3%) said they made purchases through the Russian-speaking online community, which has various buy-sell groups — launched by the participants themselves under its umbrella. The most frequently sold items are second-hand clothes. However, because the survey question referred only to home-interior items, the response rate was somewhat low. These buy-sell communities are in fact rather active. The interior items that had been listed for sale on the website most recently before my study took place were chandeliers and leftover wallpaper,\(^1\) and they had quickly found customers. A few community members offer their driving services to facilitate transactions. When the items are initially brought from former Soviet republics, transactions tend to happen fast; items that can be obtained in Japan remain for longer on the pages of the group. Nonetheless, in most cases these items have been stylised according to the personal preferences of the holders. In a migrant context, taste — described by Pechurina as the ‘national taste of home’ [Pechurina 2016] —

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\(^1\) At least three women among my interviewees had undertaken to renovate their apartments in Japan on their own, either in full or partially. They retained the services of friends and freelance workers rather than buying a full ‘reforming’ package from a Japanese company. In these cases, the respondents had procured items such as tiles or wallpaper by themselves. According to the survey results, only 19.1% had contracted Japanese companies to renovate their homes. This finding is partially explained by the fact that 59.5% of the respondents live in rented housing where renovations by the tenants are prohibited.
emerges as a shared category for people with a common past; this commonality means that many transactions are successful.

Practical factors such as time, money, and access to information collectively act as constraints in this example of bricolage. One person might not have time for lengthy shopping trips, whereas another might not know where to look for items of certain styles at reasonable prices (minding a budget was a common theme among my informants). A third person might — like one of my interviewees on a spousal visa explained — feel that investing in designing one’s home is ‘pointless’ with regard to both time and money, because her status as a migrant and her husband’s frequent relocations for work leave her feeling that her home is impermanent. These factors, independently or as a whole, influence the formation of action patterns, which increases the likelihood of purchases of low-cost used items in online buy-sell groups. Yet the nature of an object as ‘Russianised’ through its previous possessors — or in the words of Kopytoff [Kopytoff 1986], ‘singularisations’ — can add to its appeal. The object becomes vintage in an enhanced sense, having passed the test of ‘usefulness’ by one’s fellow countrymen and thus bearing all the emotions and tensions associated with migration and experienced by a fellow migrant. It may thus become ‘ethnic’ even if it never travelled to one’s home country. I argue that these items are often bought impulsively, without a clear project in mind, but in the hope of materialising one’s memories, emotions, and aspirations. These purchases may be, as Lévi-Strauss argues, ‘the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions and deconstructions’ [Lévi-Strauss 1966: 17].

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the DIY practices of Russian-speaking migrants residing in Japan. I use the term ‘DIY’ in a broad sense to encompass both items that are fully made by someone and those that are co-made as a result of even slight modifications and adjustments. I also classified as DIY items that are purchased through unconventional channels, where the procurement process becomes a co-making act. I have applied the concept of bricolage (through its components of constraints, organising logic, and resistance) to dissect the outcomes of these practices and to determine the tensions they contain. The ultimate aim of this dissection is to reveal why the very objects that the migrants make or procure — rather than other items — end up ‘appearing’ in their homes. The objects serve as markers of their holders’ transforming identities. Bricolage helps us see that a predetermined range exists for what the migrants might have in their possession in various
circumstances and life stages. The objects in the migrants’ homes are made and procured under both material and emotional constraints and through dialogic resistance towards the host culture, with the process relying on a range of seemingly eclectic yet socio-culturally predetermined set of tools. A variety of themes serve as organising logic, from Mila’s ‘Europeanness’ and Lisa’s customers’ romanticism to the nostalgia of survey participants who make an item by themselves in order to infuse the object with an ethnic spirit, or who are attracted to familiar items that pop up on the screens of the online buy-sell groups they belong to.

The cases of Mila and Lisa reveal the inner emotional life of the objects, projected onto them by their holders, who obtained them through the acts of bricolage. Although these objects are not definite in the sense that they do not define who their keepers are, their physicality reveals much about the emotional searching performed by the migrants in my sample. As Lévi-Strauss argues, ‘a “bricoleur” may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it’ [Lévi-Strauss 1966: 21]. Hence these objects, through their shapes, sizes, and colours, bear reflections of those who ‘singularised’ them [Kopytoff 1986].

The discussion brings us back to the remarks made about migration and materiality, in which emotional tension is identified as one of the crucial components to look for in the migrants’ material culture. Knepper [Knepper 2006: 80] describes this tension as ‘seams and scars’ in an argument about the effects of bricolage in terms of identity construction. The objects discussed in this paper reveal that through bricolage the migrants are searching for their new selves. Along the way, the objects are infused with transformed meanings.

Acknowledgements

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1 This is comparable to Pechurina’s [Pechurina 2015] observations in which ‘diasporic objects’ can be interpreted as constituting a predetermined range of items in the migrants’ possession. Gurova’s [Gurova 2013] concept of ‘style repertoires’ in clothing similarly suggest a dimension that underlies what a migrant chooses to wear.
References


Illustrations from the article by Ksenia Golovina

Ill. 1. Fly-shaped sugar-pot. Photo by K. Golovina
Ill. 2. Green cushion made of obi, kimono sash.
Shortly before the informant’s moving out of this apartment.
Photo by K. Golovina