

## **The Trope of the Suitcase: Narratives of Mobile Identities amongst Transnational Russian Migrants.**

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In 1986, Russian émigré author Sergei Dovlatov published *The Suitcase*, a novel where each chapter presented a story of a seemingly-nondescript object brought from the Soviet Union to New York in a “plywood suitcase, covered with fabric...” (1990:6). While it is tempting to consider these vignettes as a reflection of the author’s biography, and thus, to make analogies between literary narratives and the experiences retold in migration narratives by other cultural producers, ethnographic interviews about migrant belongings reveal an important distinction between these accounts. Heeding Andrea Witcomb’s (2012) call for the investigation of material culture in the negotiation of homeland and displacement, forty-five in-depth interviews were conducted in intellectual and historical centres of Russian migration—Prague, Berlin, Paris and New York—underscoring the nuances of narrating material worlds as representations of migrant journeys. In contrast to literary accounts about possessions transported in a suitcase, which present a complete, closed-loop narrative where objects serve as symbolic links between past and present, ethnographic interviews reveal an open narrative that reflects flexible, mobile identities and subtler, often incongruous associations between places and things. Moreover, these differ markedly between social classes, generations, “waves” of Russian migration, and political attitudes, revealing important strategies of adaptation and self-identification in a new cultural context. The disparity of migrant narratives indicates the need for a different analytical approach: instead of seeking to recreate biographical detail, evidence shows that both ethnographic interviews and literary works use performative tropes in discussing the suitcase and the objects it transports. This paper offers a new perspective on narrating objects of migration, in arguing that, much like Sergei Dovlatov’s prose, interviews can be analyzed as constructions; as works of fiction that retrospectively enunciate a more nuanced journey of migration.

