

**Transcending Return: Conceptions of Place, Home, and Homeland Among the
Meskhetians of Georgia**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the Meskhetians – those who Stalin deported in 1944 from what is now the rural southwest of the Republic of Georgia. Based on the testimonies of Meskhetians, who have since managed to return to Georgia, residing in the villages of Tsitelubani, Nasakirali, Ianeti, Akhaltsikhe, and Abastumani, this study explores the conceptual entities of place and movement as they interact with issues of nostalgia, identity, return, home, and homeland. Through the narratives of my informants, place and movement lose their conceptual exclusivity. Place becomes a messy, complex construct, one that is created through lived experiences. As such, this study endeavours to challenge traditional preconceptions of what 'return' migration entails, blur the lines of conventional thinking regarding displacement and emplacement, capture the processes and challenges of making home in a place that is supposed to encompass it, and briefly examine paths of further migration that transcend return.

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INTRODUCTION

After almost seventy years in exile, the passing of the Law of Repatriation in 2007 by the incumbent Saakashvili regime has created a legal framework to facilitate the return of the Meskhetian community to the Republic of Georgia. In 2011, Georgia awarded the first official statuses of repatriation to seventy-five Meskhetians residing in Azerbaijan – twelve years after such an apparatus became a conditional clause of Georgia’s membership in the Council of Europe. Despite its staggered and haphazard implementation, the Law of Repatriation constitutes a mechanism that can allow for the potential restitution of one of the most protracted Soviet legacies of oppression. Moreover, it can allow the Republic of Georgia – looking to cement itself as a western, capitalist state – to show some adhesion to values promoted by Europe in an attempt to integrate itself closer to the European Union and NATO. Yet the process of repatriation and return, though often iterated as the ideal and durable solution for forced migrants, does not constitute an end in itself, nor necessarily a return to normalcy for those that it seeks to ‘restore’.

In a time when flows of people, capital, and information move across international boundaries and spatial divides seem to be shrinking at ever-increasing speeds, the Meskhetians of the former Soviet Union offer an invaluable and unique case through which to examine the conceptual constructions of space and place, identity negotiation and consolidation, migratory flows in post-Soviet Eurasia, and more generalized narratives of global movement. Moreover, those Meskhetians who have chosen to take paths leading to the polity of Georgia highlight the importance of

renegotiating how we conceptualize place as they at once embody these seemingly oppositional forces of emplacement and mobility.

This thesis – through an examination of those Meskhetians who, against most odds, have already managed to return to Georgia – strives to illuminate the complexities that such an undertaking entails. The stories that I have collected from Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia frame narratives of loss, adaptation, and the hope of renewal. They demonstrate the importance of the present, while recognizing connections that transcend space and time – both past and future. It is through these narratives that this study weaves together themes of identity, integration, return, restoration, and the primacy of place. Recent literature has sought to question the salience given to place, and the tautological lines of primordial belonging that seem to congruently emanate from it. Indeed, this discourse of ‘sedentarism’ – prevalent throughout policy and academic enquiries alike – has recently come under scrutiny (Malkki 1992). This challenge to such longstanding and well-entrenched narratives has offered a welcome change and gained a strong reception from the scholarly community. Indeed, place has come to embody, as Massey states, a “totemic resonance”, as its symbolic value is ubiquitously mobilized in political discourse (2005, 5). “While place is claimed, or rejected, in these arguments in a startling variety of ways, there are often shared undergirding assumptions: of place as closed, coherent, integrated as authentic, as ‘home’, a secure retreat; of space as somehow originally regionalized, as always-already divided up” (*ibid.*, 5). The logic that informs such radical, exclusive ideologies as illiberal ethno-cultural nationalism¹ and policies of ethnic cleansing provides clear examples of the negative, dangerous effects

¹ Here I borrow from Brown’s formula for delineating ‘visions’ of the nation. The other two are civic and multicultural. It should be noted that all have the capability to be inherently exclusionary. Thus, I argue, it is all the more necessary to employ a new understanding of place.

that positing essentialized links that bind people to place can have. However, as Jansen claims “the rootless fantasies proposed by some as an anti-sedentarist antidote sound cruelly naïve to those violently expelled from ‘their’ place” (2009, 44).

Indeed, it is within this paradigm that this thesis attempts to explore the primacy of place as it resonates among Meskhetians who have made the journey to Georgia. While asserting that the essentialized links that root people in place need to be further explored and questioned, it seeks to maintain the importance that place continues to hold for many. My informants have and continue to participate in processes of globalization and modern flows of migration, ideas, and commodities – traits that some have taken as evidence of a de-territorialized disposition, relinquishing the importance that place holds among Meskhetians.² This assumption, however, postulates space and, subsequently, place as constant, fixed, and smooth entities – things that can, and therefore should, be crossed and conquered (Massy 2005). I argue that we need to change how we conceptualize these entities. People do not simply reside in place or on space, but rather interact with each. These processes create a multiplicity of trajectories, interpretations, understandings, and, therefore, realities that come to define the contours of what we consider space and place.

Place is produced through movement – by those who arrive, those who leave, and those who stay behind; by the quotidian paths of securing livelihoods; and pathways that transcend the supposed finality of return. Place is anything but static, simple, or smooth. Conversely, it constitutes a ‘sedimentation of histories’ (Reeves 2011, 307) – tangled, messy, and interwoven. While this study initially sought to solely offer an ethnographic account of the Meskhetian people and their conceptions of home and homeland, the

² See Ray 2000, 2004

emphasis they afforded the saliency of place has made it a central focus of inquiry. Place and historical time constitute the mediums through which social practices occur – the manifold quotidian processes that dictate vectors of alterity and inclusion. Place however, is more than an independent variable; it is indeed made through human interaction, practices, and institutions, even as it creates and shapes these interactions, practices, and institutions (Gieryn 2000). As such, place is bound to processes of identity formation and reformation. At these conceptual foundations, place reifies strategies and sentiments of inclusion and exclusion, implying that how we identify ourselves is greatly affected by where we feel we belong and equally by where we believe we do not (Diener 2009; Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004; Malkki 1992, 1995; Smith 1999).

Rather than mitigating the importance of place in a world of movement, a further analysis of the limits of what constitutes place allows for a more holistic approach to understanding its resonance among those that have been violently forced to leave the places that they have come to call their own. Indeed, one of the major tenets of this thesis, is that despite, or perhaps due to, the multitude of disparate locations where Meskhetians have been forcibly – or voluntarily – moved, place, while its meaning may be contested, never loses its importance.

Contested Points of Origin

Contemporary southwest Georgia – considered the historic homeland of the Meskhetians – has long been claimed by many as their own. Today, however, not unlike periods in the past, this borderland is a place of complex interaction, coexistence, and cooperation. Moreover, the present myriad of linguistic, confessional, and ethnic groups that inhabits the region is one that exists in a delicate balance sustained by a continuous

flux of people. It is a region that is trying to come to terms with its diverse population while managing a history that has attempted to establish a rigid, Gellnerian map – one in which ethnicity and administrative territorial lines run congruently with one another (1983). The fact that lines of inclusion and exclusion, power and loss, and privilege and repression run along lines of ethnicity and nationality is a fact not lost upon Georgia's constituents. The urgency with which these categories are presented as immutable and primordial often betray the reality that they are not – the Georgian nation itself the product of myriad constructed mythico-histories (Malkki 1992) harnessed and shaped by Soviet authorities in the recent past. The fact that many define the region, at least spatially, along national lines influences and shapes the narratives of Georgians and minorities alike. Moreover, it places an acute sense of importance on the history of those who would call the region their own – as perceived, legitimate rights to call the region home are largely allocated to those who can articulate a history that promotes an identity deemed appropriate. It is through these circumstances that the Meskhetians who presently call Georgia home have sought to define themselves, and the reason that doing so has become so important.

The boundaries that compose the Meskhetian identity today are comprised of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and geographical affiliations that they have developed throughout their history. That is to say, internal conceptions of identity, home, and homeland are seldom articulated in unison throughout the Meskhetian community. The events surrounding their deportation and exile are extremely pertinent in creating and strengthening a pan-communal narrative and sense of identity – for Meskhetians, this loss

of place has acted as a crystallizing event that has hardened conceptions of who they are and where they belong.

The historical underpinnings of the Meskhetian people are strongly rooted within the fluctuating conceptualizations of community in the locations that they have come to inhabit. Through this fluctuation, Meskhetians identify themselves based on a combination of perceptions, negotiations, and impositions that manifest themselves in multiple everyday processes. It has been argued that their identity is fluid – changing across time and place – defined at the conjuncture of external strain and internal interpretation (Aydingun 2002a). Although this formula is not particular to the Meskhetian case of ethnic consciousness, it stands out, in that its contemporary form has coalesced around a reactionary narrative of suffering. Together, these internal interpretations and external influences have created, and continue to create, a multifaceted and dynamic social identity that delineates the limits of alterity in relation to the manifold socio-political environments in which the Meskhetians have inhabited throughout their history.

These fluctuations of identity are intrinsically tied to, and largely stem from, the ever-shifting socio-political environments of the region where they resided, their perceived homeland – historically known as Meskheti. A relatively porous border region between the Russian and Ottoman empires – and later the Soviet Union and Turkey – it is located in what is today southwest Georgia. Throughout its history this area has often been regarded with both suspicion and envy from competing external powers. The region was a source of potential strategic space, but concurrently one of disarray. It was often the backdrop of strife, but also one of coexistence – where everyday routes brought

people together. Indeed, since the time of the Great Seljuk Empire, the lands that compose southwest Georgia, largely located in the administrative boundaries of present day Samtskhe-Javakheti, were considered a frontier region – a contact point where the worlds of Christianity and Islam met. Here practitioners of both faiths lived side by side for centuries, navigating a precarious balance of both interdependence and conflict while adhering to their shifting socio-political environment (Khazanov 1992). It was amid these ebbs and flows of imperial control over the region that disputes over the ethno-genesis of the Meskhetians were formed.

The Meskhetians either trace their roots back to Georgian antecedents who were converted to Islam as the region was consumed by the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, or lineages of ethnic Turks dating much further back. The latter position postulates that there was a strong Turkic presence in Georgia dating as far back as the fifth century. Those who support this view affirm that during the 11th and 12th centuries in response to the frequent sieges that befell Georgia, King David IV employed the creation of a buffer zone to protect his polity. This narrative states that in so doing, he urged Qipchak Turkic tribes, who had been present since the fifth century, to settle and establish a protective perimeter around his borders, which in the twelfth century included Meskheti (Aydingun et al. 2006). By the thirteenth century, hundreds of thousands of Qipchaks and other Turkic and Mongol people settled in Meskheti (Tomlinson 2002). Thus, instead of viewing Ottoman rule as the inception of Turkish existence in Georgia, this discourse claims that the Turkish presence in Georgia was only augmented and consolidated by the influx of Turks as the region fell under the control of the Ottoman

Empire (Pentikainen and Trier 2004). Some have gone as far as to argue that it was during the pre-Ottoman time that the Meskhetians' Turkic ethnicity was solidified.

This claim however, proves oversimplified and problematic. Even in the late 19th century conceptualizations of ethnicity and nationalism were still quite vague, and retained only limited importance in the region. Primary indicators of identity were found in other nodal points of inclusion and exclusion such as kinship, village, class, and religion (Aydingun 2002). As many of my informants recounted, local Muslims of Meskheta under Ottoman, and even later Russian, Imperial rule referred to themselves not as Turkish or Georgian, but rather natives or locals (*yerli*).³ It should also be noted that other Turks referred to the Muslim population of Meskheta as “offspring of Georgians” (*Gurcu olgu*) or “turned from Georgians” (*Gurcu donme*) (Nodia 2002, 43). Thus, at the turn of the twentieth century there was a little consensus concerning ethnicity among Meskhetians, and a hesitancy among Turks toward conceptualizing them as co-ethnics.

Moreover, it has been argued that while Meskhetians' sense of Turkish identity – professed and justified mainly through their confessional and linguistic affinities – had strong connections with the Ottoman Empire, it lacked substantial synapses with the newly formed Turkish nation-state. As Chervonnaya argues,

In no way did they (the Meskhetians) perceive themselves as citizens of the new Turkey that was build [sic] on the ruins of the Osmannic Empire, they were never influenced by the “Young-Turkish” movement and ideology. They did not participate in the annihilation of the Armenians in 1915. In every way, they were and felt rather distant to the Turkey of the twentieth century (1998).

³ Although Meskhetians residing in Georgia today assert their Georgian identity, many of my informants also employed the term *Yerli* to describe themselves. For more on this as it was used in the 19th century see Nodia 2002.

While this statement belies a more complicated picture,⁴ it does illustrate a lack of ethnic consciousness and nationalist rhetoric in the region even after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, a rigid consciousness of idiosyncratic ethnic identity would not coalesce among those who today consider themselves Meskhetian until the deportation of 1944.

Counter to the Turkish camp, those who argue the Georgian narrative maintain that Meskhetians are descendants of the heterogeneous population who inhabited the border-porous region of Meskheta – consisting predominantly of ancient Georgian Meskh tribes.⁵ According to this discourse, Turkish existence in Georgia did not take shape until the Ottoman invasion of 1578 (Aydingun et al. 2006). This view centres on the Turkicization and Islamification of these ancient Georgian tribes as they were subjected to an intense period of enculturation and religious conversion throughout nearly three centuries of Ottoman rule (Pohl 2004; Sheehy and Nahaylo 1980). As a result, the majority of the population converted to Islam and adopted an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish. Advocates of this narrative assert that it was this confessional and linguistic difference that distanced those in the region from their Christian Georgian counterparts – not their ethnicity.

Meskheta, officially becoming part of the Russian Empire when the Peace Treaty of Adrianople was signed in 1829, placed the fortresses of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki under Russian rule. The region, however, would remain in flux, existing between Ottoman and Russian spheres of power throughout various Russo-Turkish Wars, World War I, the revolution of 1917, and the uncertain periods of conflict that followed

⁴ Many Meskhetians sided with their Muslim counterparts across the Ottoman and Turkish border during World War I and in its immediate aftermath, and continue to strongly identify with their perceived Turkish ethnicity. See Aydingun 2002, 2007

⁵ But also Kurds, Khemshins, and Karapapakhs

(Aydingun 2002). In 1915 – attempting to solidify this porous border region – some six thousand “refractory” (*nepokornye*) Muslims were deported from the Russian-controlled, southwest Caucasus to the interiors of Russia under the commands of the Viceroy of the Caucasus, Vorontsov Dashkov, on the grounds that they had supported Turkish troops the year before (Lohr 2003, 151). This established an ominous precedent of state power in the management of place and people within the region. While many were allowed to return in 1917 (*ibid.*), it laid the foundations for a similar tragedy, one much larger in scale, which would occur less than thirty years later.

Before the region’s incorporation into the Soviet Union it was religion that constituted the predominant marker of identity in the region (Nodia 2002). Following Georgia’s brief period of independence and its absorption into the Soviet Union, Meskhetians residing in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic were subjected to Soviet constructivist nationalities policies, which emphasized the importance of ethnicity (Khazanov 1992).⁶ Borrowing from their imperial antecedents and their need to label and quantify peoples, these policies produced divergent interpretations of the Meskhetians’ identity as they facilitated an orientation toward both Turkification and Azerbaijanization during different periods until the outbreak of World War II. This endeavour was based largely on ethno-confessional parameters and focused on honing and solidifying a Turkish and Azerbaijani culture and linguistic markers of identity, most notably through offering education in both Turkish and Azerbaijani. Until 1926, educational instruction was administered in Turkish, at which point it changed to Azerbaijani – supposedly due to shortages of Turkish teachers (Tomlinson 2002). This shift to Azerbaijani mirrored efforts throughout the Transcaucasus that sought to “Azerbaijanize” its constituent Turkic

⁶ For more on Soviet nationalities policies see Martin 2000, 2001; Slezkine 2000; Suny 1993

populations. By the mid 1930s all of the Turkic peoples of the Transcaucasus were deemed to be Azerbaijani by central Soviet authorities (Gachechiladze 1995). Concurrently, Georgian assimilationist policies encouraged the Muslim populations of southwest Georgia to change their Turkish surnames to Georgian, and in some cases Russian, ones. It is at these intersections of identity (Turkish, Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Soviet) that Meskhetians existed until their deportation in 1944.

The deportation has created an entrenched feeling of loss and victimization among Meskhetians that is maintained through its narration to following generations (Ray 2000, 2004; Tomlinson 2002; Trier and Khanzhin 2007). This collective memory based on survival and dispersion supports cohesiveness, and indeed constitutes the most accurate criteria for establishing who the Meskhetians are, as it circumscribes debates based on reductive accounts of ethno-genesis utilized by ethnic entrepreneurs, state authorities, and international organizations to promote certain agendas and harden Meskhetian identities based on ethnic exclusivity (Trier and Khanzhin 2007). Though, this collective memory champions a distinct rhetoric and agenda of its own – that of return to historic Meskheta in the Republic of Georgia. As Sheehy and Nahaylo state in an attempt to define the group in terms that are both more inclusive and useful for capturing the Meskhetians experience of the twentieth century,

Those who describe themselves today as Meskhetians are ethnically a heterogeneous group. They have in common that they are all either Turkic or Turkicized; that they previously inhabited Meskheta, a mountainous region on the Soviet-Turkish frontier in south-west Georgian SSR; and that they were all deported to Central Asia and Kazakhstan on 15 November 1944 (1980, 24).

Thus, the interaction of pluralistic internal creation and external force has produced a complex sense of identity – at times at odds with itself, but at its core, one that has coalesced around a shared, pan-communal narrative of loss of place.

The Loss of Place

Soviet mass migrations and deportations began in the 1920s, and trace their existence further back to Tsarist policies.⁷ This arguably manifested itself in the realization that tools present in its pursuit to conquer, mould, tame, and employ space and nature were equally useful in shaping human nature and society. This realization caused a marked transition from a politics of socio-political determinism to one of mass mobilization and movement (Weiner 2003). Moreover, it precipitated significantly more zealous policies and institutions at the state level. These ultimately culminated in the Soviet state being regarded as the tautological supreme arbiter of the ascription of culture and identity, and the definitive voice in shaping society and who was worthy to inhabit it. What occurred during World War II, however, was hitherto unprecedented in terms of its scale and focus (Bugai 1994, 1995; Martin 1998; Polian 2004). Beginning with the Volga Germans in 1941, policies of forced wartime resettlement would subsequently be imposed on Kalmyks, Karachais, Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, and Crimean Tatars. Indeed, as war laid waste the Eastern Front and Soviet losses mounted, authorities intensified campaigns to deport entire groups of people that were deemed as potential threats.

These undesirable elements were officially either accused of treason or regarded as untrustworthy due to kinship networks that existed with bordering states. This logic

⁷ On Tsarist policies specifically in southern Georgia and the Caucasus in general see for example: Lohr 2003; Nodia 2002

lent itself easily to Muslims in the southwest of Georgia, as they were seen as historically colluding with Ottoman forces and retaining extensive kinship networks with their counterparts across the Turkish border. By 1944, there were plans drawn up by the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Georgian SSR and the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars to resettle the Muslim populations of Meskheta to the eastern regions of the republic. March 1944 saw the forced resettlement of some 3,240 persons, largely Azerbaijanis and Kurds, to what is today's Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia (Bugai 1995). By summer, however, plans had changed, and the ultimate destination of the larger Meskhetian population was to be found in the republics of Central Asia. Indeed, as summer turned to autumn, Soviet authorities prepared to disperse thousands of Muslims from southern Georgia.

On November 15, 1944, in a moment that would crystallize their identity and solidify the importance of place, the Muslim populations of Georgia's southern region of Meskheta-Javakheti, the Meskhetians, and non-Georgian Muslims in neighbouring Ajara were to be "resettled" (Bugai 1995).⁸ People were hastily informed that they were to be deported, that they should prepare rations for three days, and that they had two hours to pack (Bugai 1996). The ominous Studebakers that had become synonymous with deportations collected the Meskhetians from their homes and transported them to Akhaltsikhe where they were transferred into cattle cars (Alieva in *Tak Eto Bylo* 1999). Within two days of the initial November 15th deportation, 25 trains had departed Georgia heading for Central Asia (Polian 2004).

⁸ It should be noted that the boundaries between these smaller Muslim groups, notably the Kurds, Khemshins, and Teremekes and the Meskhetian Turks have become rather fluid due to their shared experiences of deportation and exile and subsequent practices of intermarriage as a survival mechanism (Aydingun 2002a). Despite the retention of some cultural peculiarities among the smaller Muslim groups, they can be considered as Meskhetian Turks (Trier and Khanzhin 2007).

Thus, the entire Muslim population of Georgia's southern region of Meskheta, including Meskhetians along with smaller groups of nomadic Karapapakhs, Kurds, Khemshils, and Roms were forced from their homes. Weeks later, the same process would befall non-Georgian Muslims including Khemshils, Kurds, Meskhetians, and Turks in neighbouring Ajara. According to official records, over 90,000 people were deported from the two regions throughout the month of November (Bugai 1994; Pohl 1999; Trier and Khanzhin 2007).⁹ Later, upon their return from the front, as many as 10,000 soldiers of the Soviet army who belonged to these banished groups were also deported. In the following years, several hundred people who had escaped, or were overlooked, during the initial deportation were also detained and sent to Central Asia. The callous nature of the deportations and poor living conditions found in the special settlements of the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek SSRs caused the deaths of untold thousands. Those who survived this horrific event were left to live in, seemingly, eternal exile (Aydingun et al. 2006; Mirkhanova 2006; Trier and Khanzhin 2007).

Throughout their exile, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Meskhetians would continue to exist in the peripheries of not only space and place, but also academic, political, and social concern. The special settlements that they were sent to in the Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh SSRs were highly restrictive. In accordance with legislation regarding the judicial conditions of 'special settlers' – those who were resettled in the Soviet interior to provide a much-needed labour force – Meskhetians had to procure permission to move, and leaving the special settlement zones was prohibited entirely (Sumbadze 2007). This environment of constraint lasted for twelve years. Only after the

⁹ There is a wide array of estimates at how many were actually deported. According to some sources, numbers were as large as 240,000 (Bugai 1994).

death of Stalin and the subsequent execution of Beria was there hope for the assuagement of this constrictive settlement regime.

The year 1956 denoted a marked shift as constraints on special settlers were, to a certain degree, lifted, and Khrushchev implemented mechanisms that sought the full rehabilitation and return of five of the peoples that were displaced under Stalin (Trier and Khanzhin 2007). For the Meskhetians, however, no such mechanism existed as the central authorities, in congruence with their Georgian counterparts, instead of envisioning their repatriation, maintained that the Meskhetian communities should settle permanently in their present locations. Issues of spatial deficiency and economic woes as cited by Georgian SSR authorities and the perceived geostrategic significance of Meskheti-Javakheti rendered the Meskhetians' return, en masse, unattainable both during and after the Soviet period.¹⁰

According to a Decree of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet on 30 May 1968 those considered to be Meskhetians,

...who are USSR citizens and who previously lived in the Adzhar ASSR, the Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Adigeni, Aspindza, and Bogdanovka districts of the Georgian SSR, and the members of their families, enjoy the same right as do all citizens of the Soviet Union to live anywhere in the USSR in accordance with legislation in force on labour and passport regulations (quoted in Trier and Khanzhin 2007, 652).

However, it never provided justification or a means for their official repatriation. Rather, it noted that those, "... who previously lived in the Georgian SSR have settled permanently in the territory of the Uzbek SSR, the Kazakh SSR and other Union Republics" (*ibid.*). Moreover, to exacerbate their situation, in the decades following their initial deportation, Meskhetians fell victim to a number of further displacements. This

¹⁰ The majority of what is now Samtskhe-Javakheti had become a restricted Soviet border zone.

insistence of permanent resettlement by the authorities, as it was framed through a Soviet paradigm, speaks to the fact that they did not consider the Meskhetians as a unique people – as nations needed their own territory to exist. Conversely, this only reified Meskhetians' hold on their identity and the location where it could be truly realized.

The Trope of Return

In instances of forced migration the return to a perceived historic point of origin is quixotically thought to provoke sentiments of closure – a definitive end. Koser and Black argue repatriation may bring about an end to the “refugee cycle”, but it also indicates the beginning of a new one (1999,17). This thesis questions the validity of asserting that the nuances of movement, both voluntary and not, can be adequately captured by envisioning it in such cyclical terms. Surely return entails its own myriad of possibilities and boundaries to be explored and constructed.

To assume that repatriation represents a return to normalcy is to give credence to reductive essentialist thinking and fails to capture the intricacies that are involved in such a process. As Jansen and Lofving argue: “People’s movement through rather than simply away from violence, their ‘search for cool ground’, for places to (re)make home ... challenge both popular and scholarly notions of migration and the discourse on violence and place on which they are based” (2009, 2). This emphasizes the importance of analyzing such movement through an experiential lens – one that is able to capture the intricacies of the quotidian processes that those involved embark on in their struggles. Moreover this experiential lens offers a paradigm that, rather than sequestering the importance given to place as some sort of backward, reactionary throwback to exclusionary thinking, calls for a dynamic understanding and appreciation of place at a

conceptual level. Through this prism, place, and the ability to put oneself or others in it, can be viewed in terms of power. Furthermore, this paradigm makes the distinction between those who are moving and those who are not less important – rather the (in)ability to live, work, and aspire in the place one is located becomes paramount.

Displacement and emplacement become modalities of the same set of processes and practices (*ibid.*). Indeed, categories of movement give way while places retain their importance. Moreover, through such a conceptual deconstruction of movement it is possible to expand what place has traditionally been considered to entail. If recent scholarship has called into question the supposed intrinsic connection between people and place by challenging the dominant sedentarist discourse – something that was tautologically taken for granted – is it beyond reason to question our conceptualizations of what constitutes place? I argue that by breaking the conceptual fetters that surround our understanding of place – those that warrant its existence solely at the limits of movement, both before and after it occurs – the multiplicity of messy, tangled trajectories that define places comes into view more clearly.

Methodology

In order to solicit the primary data for this project, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Republic of Georgia during the summer of 2011 in the communities of Tsitelubani, Nasakirali, Ianeti, Akhaltsikhe, and Abastumani. After attaining ethical clearance from Carleton University I conducted intensive oral histories of Meskhetian returnees through a series of open-ended qualitative questions. During the months of July and August, I was able to carry out interviews with 17 informants. These semi-structured interviews lasted between approximately 45 minutes and two hours. I tried to ensure that

the interviews were carried out in environments where my respondents felt most comfortable; as such the majority of the interviews took place within their respective homes. They were completed individually or in groups of two or three depending on the situation and preferences of my informants. Some formal interviews were followed by casual yet lengthy conversations often over a spread of food graciously prepared by my hosts, while other respondents seemed more than eager to finish our dialogue as quickly as possible.

Collecting data for this project presented me with a number of significant challenges. I left for Tbilisi, Georgia in June 2011 where I coordinated with, and briefly volunteered for, the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI). It was through this organization that I was able to access my informants as I accompanied a team of researchers from ECMI to the communities where I conducted my research. Together with a digital voice recorder and a pre-scripted list of open-ended questions, I set out to collect the primary data for this study, and while finding willing, if hesitant, respondents was relatively easy, the interview process proved daunting.

First, not all were keen to have our conversations recorded – some outright refused. Interviews with the latter required me to record our exchange by hand. While I am sure slight nuances in language were lost in the process of writing down responses, I strove to capture and convey the testimonies my informants offered as accurately as possible. It is not difficult to imagine why my informants were hesitant to converse with me, accepting to be recorded or not, as some of them have directly experienced both violence and forced displacement in the recent past, and all are cognizant of the events of

1944 and what it entailed – thus, being weary of outsiders interested in their opinions of place and where they felt they belonged.

Second, and not unrelated to the first hurdle, the temporal constraints of my research were an issue that influenced the scope and discourse of my informants' narratives. Given the remoteness of the majority of the villages that I used as my field for this project and my dependence on ECMI for accessing my informants, I was only able to briefly develop rapport with them. As such, even those who most openly participated in the study did so with a certain level of reserve. Moreover, it was evidently clear that some of my informants were suspicious of my potential ulterior motives for discussing their histories in the context of place and identity. While not questioning the sincerity with which my informants answered, it was clear that they, as a minority community in Georgia, have developed a politically correct frame through which they interpret and reproduce information. These responses ultimately offered fruitful avenues of analysis as they elucidated the active exercises of emplacement employed by the Meskhetians in their everyday discourse, but I feel that with more time, my informants would have opened up further.

Third, while I wanted to balance the number of male respondents with females to get a sense of what role gender plays in Meskhetian efforts to emplace themselves in Georgia, this proved difficult. There were very few opportunities to interview female respondents as many marry young and reside within the confines of the home – limiting their knowledge of Russian. When the chance for such interviews did arise, male informants almost always accompanied my female respondents and often dominated the

interviews. As such, only five interviews were carried out with females, and only two in which they were without male accompaniment.

Indeed, the process proved challenging but also extremely rewarding. Though I do not claim to speak for the entire Meskhetian community, or even for all of those who presently reside in Georgia, I feel that the data collected for this project offers a unique insight into the Meskhetian situation. In writing this thesis, I do not attempt to definitively promote one side of the debate regarding the identity of the Meskhetians as Turks, Georgians, or something unique to both, rather I endeavour to depict and highlight the stories offered by my informants as they strive to define themselves through their individual and collective narratives.

Chapter Summaries

The following chapters seek to address the aforementioned conceptual constructs as they relate to the everyday experiences of those Meskhetians who have ‘returned’ to Georgia. Chapter one juxtaposes the current conditions of ‘sedentary’ thinking that dominate Georgian politics and society with narratives of return, as described by my informants. It ultimately argues that debates centred on the territorialized or de-territorialized nature of migrants, forced or not, are misplaced. Rather, by recognizing that place is defined by movement – as opposed to existing solely at its outer limits – this chapter seeks to question the fixity of debates regarding attachment and disconnect to place. Chapter two recognizes that displacement does not need to entail physical movement across space, but can occur as people’s relations to and with place change. It traces the everyday paths of transition travelled by Meskhetians, and argues that

displacement can involve feelings of insecurity as people find political and economic conditions changing around them – even while remaining stationary.

Chapter three details the processes and practices of making home upon ‘return’. It questions the validity of the return rhetoric in assessing the situation that would-be returnees face when as they travel such journeys. It argues that the concept of home is a multi-dimensional domain embodying spatial, temporal, and social axes. I argue that return does not necessarily dismiss the “double nostalgia” that forced migrants often feel – focusing on the past and future at the expense of the present. Rather, employing Mallet’s (2004) theory of home as a journey, this chapter maintains that home is constantly being renegotiated as both a place of past origin and point of future destination, even when that destination – a supposed place of historical origin – has been reached.

Finally, chapter four further pursues the notion that return does not signify a definitive end – as is often implied by traditional conceptions of return migration. By elucidating further instances of quotidian movement both within Georgia and to eastern Turkey this chapter examines how return migration inspires further movement. I argue that it is through seasonal work in Turkey, where Meskhetians are arguably among co-ethnics and can procure wages unattainable in Georgia, that my informants buttress their sense of Georgianess. It is through this proximity and contact that they vehemently maintain their ethnically defined distinction to Turks and reify their self-ascribed Georgian articulation of identity.

CHAPTER 1

(RE)ESTABLISHING ROOTS THROUGH ROUTES: PLACES OF MOVEMENT

In 1962 Devrim,¹¹ at the age of 20, left the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic with his family to temporarily relocate to Azerbaijan. From there he, along with some 250 other Meskhetian families, managed to resettle to the Achigvara State Farm in the Gali district of the Autonomous Soviet Republic of Abkhazia. In 1983 Cana, then 16, and her family also left Tashkent, Uzbekistan and were able to settle in the municipality of Zugdidi, a small city in western Georgia, currently the capital of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti province. Twenty-five years later Camil, a 59-year-old doctor, would embark on a similar path, moving his family from Azerbaijan to Akhaltsikhe, Georgia. These decisions to relocate were not easy, nor were they ostensibly rooted in pragmatism. Rather, the decisions were difficult, entailing leaving behind established occupations and financial stability for economic uncertainty and in some cases the severing of familial ties and friendships. Moreover, their respective destinations proved even more treacherous, as they presented manifold obstacles to overcome upon arrival.

As evidenced by these accounts, such Meskhetian stories of upheaval and attempted renewal are far from simplistic. They entail complex narratives of dispersal and attempts at return, often resulting in further displacement. Devrim and his family only stayed in Gali for three months before Soviet authorities forced them to leave due to economic and political tensions with local residents and officials. After fleeing to the Azerbaijani SSR, he again attempted to return to Georgia only to be forced to leave a

¹¹ All informants' names are pseudonyms.

third time¹², in this instance to Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. Only after a third attempt, in 1969, was he able to settle permanently. The state afforded him a home in Nasakirali, a small village in west of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, where he still resides today.¹³ Cana and her family felt compelled to leave Zugdidi and seek refuge also in Kabardino-Balkaria during the early 1990s, due to economic and political uncertainty, only to return to Georgia a few years later, attaining citizenship in the process. Cana now lives with her husband in the small village of Tsitelubani, located just outside of Gori where they own a small plot of land and partake in subsistence agriculture. Camil, conversely, managed to settle in Akhaltsikhe on his first attempt, and has lived there since 2008 where he practices medicine, despite still not possessing Georgian citizenship.

These stories of movement through coercion and attempted return span the better part of fifty years. Despite the chosen paths of these cases and the challenges they have provoked, Devrim, Cana, and Camil all set out with similar reasons for migrating to Georgia: to reclaim what they perceive to be their historic and proper homeland, and, in doing so, to correct a historical injustice that befell their people.¹⁴ In their actions to migrate to a perceived historic homeland they largely only knew through the retelling of stories, they also affirm the saliency and complexity of place, both real and imagined – especially that of home and homeland, and its ability to remain prevalent amid the challenges posed to it by globalization.

¹² Devrim was two years old at the time of the 1944 deportation.

¹³ At the time of this research Devrim and his family were planning and preparing to move to the village of Abastumani, where Devrim was initially deported from in 1944.

¹⁴ Many informants made reference to such a notion of historical “injustice” (*nespravedlivost*).

My informants' affirmation of the importance of place, as demonstrated by their numerous efforts to reclaim their perceived historic homeland, elucidates the need to revisit how place and our relationships to it, are conceptualized. For Devrim, Cana and Camil, their respective stories of return to a homeland they had never really known reflect many of those embodied by Meskhetians who have opted to relocate, or are currently planning to "return", to Georgia.¹⁵ I argue it is through participation in these movements of supposed return that Meskhetians simultaneously articulate the importance of place while challenging the validity and accuracy of the very terms that are often thought to champion and safeguard its conceptual existence: "return" and "repatriation". Indeed, their implementation highlights a disjuncture between the accepted rhetoric and the reality of how these ideas manifest themselves. A better understanding of these dynamics requires an approach that delves deeper into the relationship between people and place, a relationship that is often portrayed at its conceptual poles: as either sedentarily essentialist (territorialized) or completely unbound, porous, and fluid (de-territorialized). For Meskhetians who have opted to migrate to Georgia, neither of these extremes holistically captures their experience. Their stories elucidate the shortcomings and rigidity of such models of analysis, and facilitate an analytical approach that acknowledges the intersection of state-centric paradigms of spatialization and the diverse, quotidian lived characteristics of place (Reeves 2011, 307).

Just as place embodies societal dynamism, as a construct it too does not require spatial fixity. I posit that place is not only comprised of stationary elements, but that it also entails those in motion. Movement does not provide an interlude to place, but is an

¹⁵ At the time of researching this project 5,841 applications have been received from Meskhetian families wanting to resettle in Georgia. This translates to approximately 8,900 individuals. 75 had already received official repatriate status.

inherent part of it. As such, I argue that place is a complex, messy entity – one that is continually being constructed and established, but never finalized. In order to better capture the nuance of place, this chapter will navigate a theoretical course that establishes a conceptual middle ground, recognizing the realities of a globalized world, largely directed by global flows of people, capital, and information, while maintaining the salience of space and place and their conceptual locations as traditional bastions of political power within the international system. My informants express their attachments to, and conceptualizations of, place in multiple forms – vacillating between ambiguity and certainty as they articulate their relationship with it. Accordingly, this chapter will ultimately demonstrate how this re-conceptualization of place continues to resonate in the realities of my respondents who have opted to return to their perceived points of historic origin.

The Conceptual Fetters of Unbounded Thinking

We must, as Reeves calls for, “think of place as the always provisional *outcome* of heterogeneous trajectories of people, things, and ideas” (2011, 314). Place, as a concept, is often difficult to clearly define despite its seeming omnipotence in daily discourse. The simplicity of such commonsense, quotidian ideas and their ability to effortlessly permeate both everyday and scholarly narratives facilitates conceptual obscurity and conceals its complexities (Malkki 1992). As such, notions of what truly constitutes place have rarely been examined or challenged until the recent wave of scholarship led by Malkki and others. Given that this concept carries certain predispositions that dictate how lives are structured on a myriad of scales, the uncritical

reproduction of these supposed commonsensical beliefs continues to pose a number of political and intellectual pitfalls (Alonso 1994).

Relationships with place are often expressed through a dichotomy of ambivalence and certainty, though this is far from a rigid division. As the contours of place shift, so do the nature of perceived connections to it. Through this framework, place does not entail a passive, fatalistic backdrop on which the processes of everyday life are played out, nor does it dictate primordial, stark lines of inclusion and exclusion. Rather, as Gieryn states, place is "...an agentic player in the game – a force with detectable and independent effects on social life" (2000, 466). It exists as an active, constructed force that shapes, and is shaped by, a series of complex interactions – interactions I argue that exist between those who remain spatially still and those in movement.

According to Mondragon, movement constitutes an invaluable component of the ubiquitous processes of "... renewal, abandonment, and re-creation" that dictate the contours of emplacement (2009, 130). To observe processes of movement as independent and unconnected to the makings of place obstructs the reciprocal, transformational influence they have on one another. It is this nexus of competing claims of belonging that constitutes the process of establishing place and highlights the importance for re-conceptualizing relationships to it in an attempt to move beyond arguments "rooted" in territorialization and de-territorialization. Kirby argues that space has traditionally been postulated as something to be conquered and filled with no definitive point of conclusion (2009). Viewing such processes as merely filling empty space sequesters the making of place to linear constraints and misses the nuance and complexity of such phenomena. To establish such fixity in notions of attachment and disconnect to place belies a more

intricate depiction of these relationships. Despite these tautological underpinnings, there is a growing body of literature that challenges the supposed intrinsic nature of these ideas and beliefs – that space constitutes a vapid entity that can and should be filled by linear and singular articulations of place – by postulating that these sentiments are constructed under a myriad of circumstances to achieve particular ends.

The growing interdisciplinary interest in mobility and its effects on how place is conceptualized spans the social sciences and has done much to challenge long held notions that issues of identity and culture are immutably attached to place, a conviction that many academics and policy makers have at least implicitly supported in the past. This development has encouraged some scholars to assert that concepts of homeland, the state, and the boundaries that demarcate them are becoming increasingly anachronistic. Some feel that we are moving toward an entirely de-territorialized international community; a society in which national economies, state sovereignty, and identity lose their territorial fixity completely, declaring the era of the nation-state over and leading to a borderless world (Toal 1999). The corollary of which renders the concept of place as a container – subsequently empty. Even the most sacred of places, those which are traditionally thought to constitute home and homeland, would be unable to retain their relevance in a world of ever-increasing flows (Diener 2009; Heller 1995; Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004). These assertions are based on the increasing porosity of borders in response to the mandates of globalization and would arguably render the end of the state's role as the primary organizational unit of global political space (Diener and Hagen

2010). Thus, these sentiments possess the potential to challenge the entire incumbent global political system, the “national order of things”.¹⁶

While many studies have similarly concluded that we inhabit a world where conceptions of identity, home, and homeland are increasingly detached and unbound from place, Malkki’s work represents the boldest attempt to contest the links between people and place. She holds the notion that there is no natural connection between people and place (Malkki 1992, 1995). Essentialist, or “sedentary” (*ibid.*), forms of thinking have come to dictate a narrative of people being rooted, or trapped, in place. Her plea to disregard this discourse opens opportunities to conceptualize both home and identity in a number of ways that are, debatably, better equipped to assess the increasingly fluid nature of movement that we witness, and participate in, everyday. Her arguments have been challenged openly, and while perhaps too theoretical – at times seemingly unable to accurately account for the existence of those forced migrants she claims to speak for - Malkki’s narrative is one that helps illuminate the plight of those living through violent, involuntary movement. Indeed, the theoretical framework that her research has developed offers both resounding parallels and contradictions with the narratives that my informants shared regarding their respective journeys.

The crux of her study lies in the comparative analysis she employs in exploring two Hutu refugee settlements in Tanzania. It is from this comparison that she notes a divergence and rigid dichotomy among informants within their respective settlements in both their understandings of, and experiences in, exile; how they ascribed to national identity and history; and conceptualized what constituted nation, homeland, and home (Malkki 1992, 1995). Through these marked differences, she asserts a de-emphasis in the

¹⁶ Here I borrow Malkki’s articulation of the international order.

importance of place and its supposed enduring influence on identity.

Her narrative ultimately concludes that this contrast elucidates a growing shift in our understanding of the relationship between people and place, one that is more cosmopolitan and de-territorialized. She accomplishes this by documenting how her displaced informants from seemingly similar points of origin and in comparable conjunctures of asylum underwent starkly disparate methods of creating communal discourses. Though those respondents who settled in a compact camp tried to maintain distinct narratives of their Burundian disposition, her informants who settled in the town of Kigoma did not employ such "...spontaneous, oratorical, didactic monologues about the history of the Hutu" (*ibid.*, 195) as a method to construct a distinct collective identity. Instead, they sought ways in which to assimilate themselves into the larger Tanzanian society and consequently, in doing so, they produced, what Malkki sees as, more cosmopolitan identities (*ibid.*, 4). In Kigoma, she argues "...the very ability to 'lose' one's identity and to move *through* categories was for many a form of social freedom and even security" (*ibid.*, 16). This leads to the belief that place, or places of origin, have only minimal importance in the daily narratives of identity articulation. Malkki argues that the only way her informants could avoid the danger of being detected by locals was by hiding their identity, implementing a false identity, or by maintaining a position in society that was largely undetectable by others – accomplished in all cases by actively undermining their attachments to Burundi.

Not only does the strategy of actively subverting their attachments to place employed by the refugees of Kigoma call into question the notions of freedom and security attached to it by Malkki, the depiction of her informants actively subverting their

connections to Burundi for reasons of security and stability also challenges her claims that they did so willfully and free of coercion. Moreover, her discourse of de-territorialized identities belies the importance of place, as newfound attachments to it are ever-present. Credence in such arguments regarding the detachment of place from people is itself misplaced, in that it emphasizes de-territorialization but fails to recognize the congruent processes of re-territorialization. “To plot only ‘places of birth’ and degrees of nativeness,” Malkki, somewhat contradictorily, states, “is to blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them,” (1992, 38). It is this acceptance of a multiplicity of attachments to place that, in fact, reifies its importance as a nodal point of identity and rights. While postmodern narratives that mirror these sentiments regarding the disconnect between identity and territory are not without their merits, as they evoke the need to re-evaluate how we conceptualize space and place, their critiques of the importance of place are leveraged by those who promote discourses of territorial detachment – the ubiquitous homelessness of everyone.

The idea that everyone is completely detached from place – free-floating from one to another – not only misses a more nuanced reciprocal relationship between people and place, but exists in a world where place continues to be regarded as the ultimate arbiter of power and rights. Indeed, theoretical claims of unboundedness exist amid an international system that has repeatedly championed the nation-state as its ideal vehicle for political processes and the ultimate tautological benefactor of the socio-economic rights of inclusion. Theoretical claims of unboundedness arise amid a proliferation of states and their subsequent lines of delineation, an unwavering dedication to a discourse

of return for forced migrants, and an overall hardening of ascribed national identity. Therefore, to solely pursue political and social inquiries of space and place, identity, and transnationalism through the paradigm of de-territorialization in the contemporary world would prove myopic. As Kibreab states, “at a time when spaces are more territorialized than ever before, to speak of de-territorialization of identity does not make sense. There can be no de-territorialized identity in a territorialized space” (1999, 387). Here, he defines territoriality as “the attempt by an individual or group [and states] to affect, influence, or control people, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area,” (*ibid.*, 387). Indeed, this assertion is not baseless, as Kibreab goes on to state:

In a world where rights such as equal treatment, access to sources of livelihoods, social services, rights of freedom of movement and residence are apportioned on the basis of territorially anchored identities, the identity people gain from their association with a particular place is an indispensable instrument to a socially and economically fulfilling life, (1999, 385).

This recognizes the ability of authorities to exert power through the process of making space into place. It is a sentiment that has dominated not only conceptual thinking about space and place, but also the socio-political practice of dictating the delineation of inclusive and divisive barriers.

These political developments, and the effects they have on individuals and the state, must be viewed in tandem with a renewed commitment to the existing traditional manifestations of politics at local and state levels (Wilson and Donnan 1998). Such an approach is paramount when attempting to navigate the intricate relationship between people and place in stasis and movement, the mechanisms these same people employ when creating place, and the manifestation of, and relationship to, concepts of home and

homeland. This paradigm runs counter to such repressive, collectivist ideologies as ethno-cultural nationalism and the essentialist conceptualizations of community, culture, and alterity perceived to be innately bound to them. It offers a timely challenge to such restrictive conceptual regimes. Moreover, the acute inclination of many former Soviet societies to define themselves on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, and territory, by excluding those not deemed to belong by implementing several vectors of alterity, has never been greater.

The Trappings of Place in Contemporary Georgia

The socio-political vacuity that the collapse of the Soviet Union thrust upon its successor states provided new elites with ample opportunity for new articulations of what and whom their respective places should entail – and what they should not. The path through transition has been extremely difficult for Georgia. Throughout its two short decades of independence, it has been host to numerous internal conflicts, with long-lasting internal and external ramifications (Kabachnik 2012; Nodia 2002; Zurcher 2009).

Place, as a concept, has become rigid in Georgia as a result of the difficult period of transition it has undergone. The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia coupled with the temporary loss of control of Ajara under the regional strongman, Aslan Abashidze, and the minority Azerbaijani and Armenian populations that represent majority populations in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti respectively, have ensured that place embodies a finite resource within the polity of Georgia. The pernicious nature of Georgia's transitional period has increasingly sharpened ethnic relations and divisions throughout the republic. This heightened tension has worked congruently with the various processes of, as Diener describes it, nationalizing social space (2009, 23). This

notion reifies that territory lay at the heart of national cohesion. It manifests itself as a set of practices undertaken by all modern nation-states in an attempt to impose control over territory and those who dwell in it. While this is certainly not unique to Eurasia, the effects of it are acutely present there. National construction and legitimacy, Diener iterates “are established through a discourse of modernization, which was envisioned to cultivate a national society from a landscape of disparate locals divided by both physical and social space” (*ibid.*). Space in this context, as Massey argues, is seen as flat, given and continuous, something to be conquered and shaped (2005). It was something that could be forged to incorporate those deemed appropriate and deter those who did not belong. The corollary of which entails an immutable, natural linkage between “blood and soil”, and an underlying acceptance that others merely “...lie in place without their own trajectories,”(Massey 2005, 3). As Diener states,

The territorialization of identity or construction of bonds between a specifically defined group and a particular portion of the Earth’s surface – “homeland” – generates a sense of permanence for the group designated as being rightfully emplaced, while simultaneously disavowing the claims of territorial belonging of those not defined as part of the dominant signifying group (2009, 26).

This creates an environment where the lines of division between those “in place” and those “out of place” are presented as vividly sharp – the latter having only the most tenuous ability to shape such narratives.

In Georgia, the action of delineating who belongs and who does not becomes a self-perpetuating exercise, as the state seems determined to identify itself, at least spatially, along national lines. In such a polity, territory and place and their protection from would-be external and internal enemies has become something of an obsession. As Kabachnik notes “the conflation of people and place, of the nation and its homeland, and

nationalist ideology territorializes identity. The territory of the nation, the homeland, is not simply the place where the nation resides, and not only the place where the nation belongs, but also an intricate and integral part of the nation itself” (2012, 46). Territory and its retention become synonymous with the Georgian nation and its well-being. The de facto loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been depicted and accepted as not just losses of territory, but as a grievous, and seemingly irreparable, wound inflicted on the nation. These ‘lacerations’ continue to shape attitudes and policies toward the rest of the polity.

Place in Georgia is a precarious commodity – one that continues to lack stabilizing permanency. Currently the country is divided into eleven administrative regions or provinces, which are further divided into approximately sixty districts.¹⁷ These administrative regions, however, hold a legally ambiguous position within the Georgian state, as the Georgian Constitution only thinly alludes to the country’s territorial arrangement, leaving any decisive settlements to be made only after the re-acquisition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the restoration of territorial integrity is realized (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2007). As it states “the internal territorial arrangement of Georgia is determined by the Constitution on the basis of the principle of division of power after the full restoration of the jurisdiction of Georgia over the whole territory of the country,” (Constitution of Georgia, Article 2, Paragraph 3). The region, Samtskhe-Javakheti, which now hosts what was the territory of historical Meskheti, is no exception to this ambiguity.

Throughout its history, what is now called Samtskhe-Javakheti has existed largely

¹⁷ If one considers Abkhazia within Georgian jurisdiction, the polity would be home to 12 administrative regions.

outside Tbilisi's traditional spheres of influence. The region's relatively harsh climate and difficult terrain surely played their part in weakening central control over the region, but the root causes of this unique path are to be found in the historical processes that have dictated its isolation and multi-ethnic and multi-confessional makeup. Located on a rocky plateau in the Mtkvari River basin, Samtskhe-Javakheti constitutes approximately 11% of Georgia's territory. Nestled along the border of Turkey and Armenia, it is one of the most ethnically heterogeneous regions of Georgia. Due largely to waves of Armenian settlement emanating from population transfers between the Russian and Ottoman Empires in the first half of the nineteenth century as well as those who escaped the Ottoman atrocities in 1915, the region is comprised of an Armenian majority (Nodia 2002; Tarkhan-Mouravi 2007; Wheatley 2004). Under Soviet rule it was deemed part of a forbidden border zone due to its proximity to Turkey (Wheatley 2004). The special border regime caused a marked isolation from the rest of the Georgian SSR. This disconnect from the rest of the Georgian SSR fostered not only economic underdevelopment, but also, stability, as it was tightly regulated by the Soviet state.¹⁸ The results of which produced a region that is more self-sufficient and less integrated in the political, socio-economic, and ethnocultural spheres of the rest of Georgia.

The ambiguous status of Samtskhe-Javakheti only serves to create further problems for the potential return of Meskhetians. The concentrated minority enclave of Armenians, who have repeatedly called for cultural autonomy since the fall of the Soviet Union, have already placed the region under Tbilisi's scrutiny. Moreover, many Armenians residing in the region participated in the Karabakh conflict during the 1990s and are extremely apprehensive about the possibility of a large settlement of Muslim and,

¹⁸ For more on the border regime in south-western Georgia see Pelkmans, 2006

as some maintain, ethnically Turkish, Meskhetians (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2007). There are also hostilities between the Armenian and Georgian populations, as the former are suspected of harbouring secessionist aspirations, and both hold mutual distrust of one another.¹⁹ The influx of a Muslim, Meskhetian population, as many locals assert, is yet another destabilizing factor, as it is met with local indignation due to prescribed histories of ethnic clashes with both Georgians and Armenians in the period prior to their deportation, augmented by sentiments conveyed through the national media (Tarkhan-Mouravi 2007). Fears of Meskhetian claims to territory and autonomy resonate deeply among Armenian and Georgian locals as they see it as a pretext of further loss. It is believed that returning Meskhetians would adopt the same conceptualization of place as finite resource, one that needs to be fought for and secured through violence, leading to further competition over territory in a polity where it is viewed as dangerously scarce already.

Roots Through Routes

Meskhetians, through their narratives and ongoing attempts to facilitate their successful settlement in Georgia, do challenge conceptions of place in the republic, though not in the manner that locals and local officials claim. My informants, while steadfast in their resolve to claim Georgia as their rightful home, never demonstrated any territorial aspirations other than to be an integrated part of the Georgian polity. In this way, they challenge the limiting, essentialized conceptions of place that still permeate the Georgian socio-political discourse. The Meskhetians, in their attempts to emplace

¹⁹ For more on the polemic between Armenians of Javakheti and the Georgian central state, see Crisis Group, 2006

themselves and co-exist within a multi-ethnic Georgia, offer alternatives to the rigid lines of belonging and exclusion that have hardened over the past two decades.

Although their transnational disposition has led scholars and policy makers to label the Meskhetians as a de-territorialized people, their ambiguous and, at times, tenuous connections to place should not be mistaken for a disconnect from it. In her assessment of Meskhetians residing in Azerbaijan, Ray highlights the division between conceptions of community and nation present among her informants, which she claims signifies a de-territorialization (2000). Ray argues that her informants' articulation of community as a group and not as a nation renders place unimportant, as "most... do not have a strong romantic or sentimental attachment to Georgia as the country of origin" (*ibid.*, 406). Moreover, she claims that any who do hold such notions, do so solely because they feel that Georgia would offer them protection through citizenship regimes. This places little importance on place, save for the security it offers.

One of the key determinants of refugee incorporation into host societies, as Kibread argues, is the attitudes and perception of the host population. Malkki's data suggest that the local population in Kigoma had little desire to incorporate the refugees into their society. This hesitancy has been present in Georgia as well. Authorities and citizens of Georgia are skeptical of what an en masse return of Meskhetians would encompass; despite interethnic relationships being presented as cordial, there is a clear, underlying tension between the two groups. This tension, while latent, has a strong effect on how Meskhetians feel they need to present themselves. Given the recent history of protracted conflict in Georgia, it should come as no surprise that this has manifested itself in the form of ethnic affiliation. Meskhetians unwaveringly refer to themselves not specifically

as Georgians, but as Kartvelians, one of the ancient Georgian tribes; thus possessing cultural affinities with their Georgian counterparts. Unlike Malkki's informants though, the Meskhetians employ these strategies as a mechanism to ensure their survival rather than to distance themselves from a particular sense of identity inspired by place. However, this affirmation of being Georgian and belonging in Georgia is not founded solely on an identity rooted in place, but is one that is buttressed through movement.

The recent history of the Meskhetians and their plight should also be taken into consideration when assessing this strategy of emplacement. This again points to the importance of the aforementioned conflation of the new political realities of a globalized world with traditional institutions of power that retain their ability to contain such new developments – namely the state. The instances of violence that have precipitated the mass movements of Meskhetians from Georgia, Uzbekistan, and most recently Russia only serve to bolster the previously mentioned sentiments regarding the importance of place, not only as a conceptually natural affiliation but also a tangible solution to perceived insecurity. As one informant stated after mentioning the socio-economic struggles that make up the everyday experience of living in rural Georgia, “still, look at Kyrgyzstan two years ago there was the uprising and again we were the victims (*zhertyvy*). Why? Because that's not our homeland. It's not like here.” When asked to explain why Georgia was different, she explained “Georgia is my protection (*Krysha*: literally “roof”). To me it does not matter if I have a good, large, or expensive home; provided that there is no war, provided that there is no hunger, provided it exists in my homeland,” (Interview, August 2011).

While security and stability retain the utmost importance among Meskhetians in their strategies for laying claim to, and making, place, among the stories that my informants shared, place itself never lost its importance, nor was it regarded solely through the context of security. Ray (2000) is correct in asserting that Meskhetians, in their calls for the right to return to Georgia, do not articulate exclusive visions of nationalism; however, her argument that this reifies their lack of concern with place runs contrary to the discourse of Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia interviewed for this project. Her argument indicates that place can be reduced to a pragmatic formula for establishing stability, and little more. As discussed, those interviewed described place as both a way to remain protected as well as a source of a sense of stability – but unlike what Ray found, my informants constantly reified their attachments to, and the importance of, place.

Assertions of such conceptual fixity miss the larger, more complex juncture of interactions and relationships that exist between localities and both those who stay within them and those who travel to, through and from them – the junctures at which place is made. Given the economic, historical, political, and social realities facing the peoples of Eurasia, we still lack, as Uehling states, “...a very clear understanding of the ways in which forced migrants in the former Soviet Union conceptualize their attachments to place and the implications of these conceptualizations for the debate concerning people, place, and identity,” (2007, 610). Even for those involved in such processes of forced displacement, the articulation of these relationships and attachments to place are evasive, as my informants’ narratives seemed to oscillate from certainty to ambiguity, and back again. Indeed, place is often alluded to, omitting to acknowledge the agentic nature of it

and its ability to independently affect social life (Gieryn 2000) – the complicated realities that confront Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia in various circumstances.

The difficult paths taken by Meskhetians in attempts to reclaim their historic homeland in the south west of Georgia lend themselves easily to the primordial exclusivity that is place, yet, as described earlier, the rhetoric my informants employed was one of inclusion and belonging. My informants' actions and stories were frequently at odds not only with the essentialized discourse of primordial attachments to place ever present in Georgia, but also their own assertions. As Devrim recounted “When we moved to Azerbaijan, we did so to get closer to our homeland. The entire time that we relocated we wanted to return to our homeland, to our Georgia,” (Interview, August 2011). He went on to clarify “ We did not leave Azerbaijan or Russia (Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria) due to hardships or a poor life. We lived well there, the people were good, the nature was beautiful, but it was not our homeland” (*ibid.*). A short period later in our discussion it was mentioned that, “...well, of course, this (Nasakirali) is not quite our homeland either. Our proper place is in Meskheta – for me, the village of Abastumani” (*ibid.*).

For her part, Cana's journey from Tashkent, Uzbekistan to the periphery of Georgia also reifies the importance that place has in informing decisions of movement. Her path occurred amid official calls and encouragement for Meskhetians to permanently settle outside of Georgia.²⁰ Moreover, at the same time, the development of, and therefore migration to, the Soviet Far East was also being officially encouraged (Sahadeo

²⁰ Amid the full restorations and repatriations of five of the other deported peoples Soviet authorities at the all union level and within the Georgian SSR decreed that the Meskhetians of south west Georgia had permanently settled wherever they, at the time, happened to inhabit. This was the official line right up until the end of the Soviet Union. See: Trier and Khazhin, 2007

2011). It also took place at a time when an increasing realization of the informal sector was being established – one that solidified the notion that economic and social mobility were linked with geographic location and movement. Along such vectors it made sense to forge paths toward larger urban centres. Yet, Cana opted for rural Georgia. Instead of the village where her parents lived before the deportation, Cana lived in Zugdidi and presently resides in Tsitelubani – though claims all three, the village where her parents were born, Zugdidi, and Tsitelubani as hers. “They are all places where I am at home. They are all places I can call my own” (Interview, July 2011).

Both traditional push and pull factors, rooted in economic stability and societal security, are poor markers of predictable migration paths, as they certainly did not promote the trajectories followed by my informants. The circumstances pertaining to migrants’ initial displacement are inseparably entangled with their perceived connection to their respective points of origin. This sentiment correlates with the views of Devrim, now a village elder, one of the few respondents who was alive during the deportation. When asked why the perceived historic homeland of Meskheta retained such importance he pensively stated “it’s not easy to explain. You have to lose your homeland before you can truly understand and appreciate its value” (Interview, August 2011). It is this notion of involuntary loss that lies at the heart of the collective longing for the right to return. Indeed, the violent nature in which Meskhetaians experienced the loss of their perceived point of origin weighs heavily on their desire to experience it once again. Being forced to leave against one’s will, more often than not, equates places of origin with senses of security, well being, and a platform for stabilizing memories (Gieryn 2000).

While some respondents preferred not to discuss the details of the deportation or the immediate harsh conditions that awaited them in Central Asia, others were very willing to share their interpretation of the events, whether they were alive to experience them or not. Regardless, this discourse of suffering and violent loss clearly followed the Meskhetians into exile and shaped the contours of their aspirations of movement. As one informant stated, her grandmother recalled Georgia with fond memories and would often say “how well they lived in Georgia. How in the old times, they had their household and farm (*khozaistvo*). They lived well there until the war” (Interview, August 2011). This nostalgia abruptly ended as she went on to lament,

Then she spoke of how they were deported. How in the evening soldiers came with cars and did not allow them to bring anything. Only bread, apples, and that was all. This she would constantly recount while crying. Everyone who remembered (the deportation) cried. My father was young at the time; he was only ten years old when it happened. His father left for the war in forty-four. It was just my grandmother and three small children. They deported all of them; cast them out of their home and deported them to Uzbekistan (*ibid.*)

Cana, unprompted, described a similar story in vivid detail, as if she had recently experienced it herself. Her narrative, however, was based on that of her mother’s, who, I was told, shared this story countless times with her family. Welling up in tears, Cana recalled that every time her mother would speak of the deportation she would cry inconsolably “at the moment she spoke of seeing her homeland for the last time” (Interview, July 2011). While in this case it is challenging to pin down exactly what constituted her homeland, the importance given to place, and the violent loss of it, is brazenly clear.

It is difficult to say what her mother meant when she referred to her homeland: was it her village of Abastumani? The region of Meskheta? Or, the Georgian SSR?

When asked, Cana was unsure, she assumed all of them probably played a part in her mother's account. Such ambivalence seems to echo Uehling's claim – it is not only scholars and policy makers that do not fully understand the mechanisms at play in establishing connections to place among forced migrants in the former Soviet Union, but those that are actually unwilling participants of the process seem to struggle with articulating such relationships as well. To further complicate matters, Cana's present home is located nowhere near the village of Abastumani or even the greater region of historical Meskheta. Yet, Cana still claims that she has returned to her rightful homeland, that here she is the master (*khozyaina*) of her surroundings, and that in establishing her place in Georgia she has completed the restoration of the injustice that befell her family and her people.

This mix of fluidity and ambivalence with rigidity and certainty regarding exactly where one's homeland is continues to be felt acutely among Meskhetians. While the environment of the Meskhetian displacement seems to have little correlation with sentiments of what constitutes the nation or homeland, as my informants can trace their paths back to different communities, it would be remiss to ignore the fluctuation among the international Meskhetian community in how they conceptualize what their homeland should include and where it should be found. Many former neighbors, and even family members, opted to stay in their places of settlement or to resettle elsewhere within the Soviet Union, or after its fall, Turkey and the United States. As Camil noted "to say that everyone (of the Meskhetian community) wants to come here (to Georgia) is a lie. It's propaganda. Sure, some will come here, others will choose different places to make their home" (Interview, August 2011). Affiliations to specific places among Meskhetians are

diverse. Many informants stated that they had friends and relatives who had little interest in venturing back to Georgia. Many see Georgia as nothing more than a historic ancestral point of origin that has little to do with their present situation. Their attachments to place are founded in the localities where they were born, where they have made their lives.²¹

This is not to say that many would not come to Georgia if they were able to, unhindered by socio-economic uncertainty my informants repeatedly stressed – nor does it discount the prominence of place, wherever it may be found. As one respondent recalled of her mother,

Of course, she wanted to return. She constantly cried. When she recalled her homeland she always cried. She always said, ‘I want to go back. That is where I want to die.’ She did not want to die there (in Uzbekistan). She would say ‘I want to die in Georgia, in my soil,’ but she simply ran out of time. But, many of our elderly who were deported from there, well, they all wanted to return to their homeland, but it did not turn out. If they were alive today, and there was a possibility to return, they would do so on foot. A month, a year, two, three, they would all come back. That is how badly they wanted their homeland, (Interview, August 2011).

When asked what returning meant for him, Devrim answered, “It’s everything. It’s a future, it’s freedom... there is no word for it. I do not know. It is something I can feel in my heart, it’s freedom, freedom to share with our families, our neighbours, and most importantly our children” (Interview, August 2011). He went on to describe his upcoming move to Abastumani, the village he was born in, “Will life be easier there? Probably not, it is mountainous there, quite cold in the winter – I am not sure if our new home will even have heating. But, listen! I will be home – more so than here! Maybe there my heart will not cry so much” (*ibid.*). Such sentiments not only highlight the perceived omnipotent value of movement in creating and establishing place, but they also

²¹ For my informants who cited such friends and family members these places of attachment were almost always located in either Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan.

betray the precarious position that the place of home holds for Devrim. Earlier in our conversation he went on at great lengths to describe how Nasakirali was definitively his place – he seemed to take pride in reminding me of how long he had resided there. However, his story quickly and quixotically abandoned this discourse to assert that Abastumani, a place he had only been to three times prior, where he knew little of the village, and less of its inhabitants, was a more natural fit. After all, it was his, in this case even more than was Nasakirali.

In employing such narratives of emplacement, in this case almost ownership, my informants also constantly affirm their Georgian identity, even at times, at the expense of their own Meskhetian identity. Claims to Georgian villages by informants as their proper homes – *their* places of origin and prosperous futures – were frequently followed up with boastful remarks of the younger generation of Meskhetians’ success with the Georgian language. One proud parent stated that “I think it is great that my child is learning Georgian. It is our proper language, we (Meskhetians) used to speak Georgian before. I hope that someday my grandchildren will only speak Georgian, not *ours* (Interview, August 2011). While this may not be indicative of what happens in private, publicly my informants vehemently stress their Georgian heritage – though they often betrayed a lack of certainty regarding just what the tenets of their rightful cultural disposition was, as the last statement highlighted. As Camil affirmed to me “I am Georgian. Purely, I am completely Georgian! I simply have a different faith” (Interview, August 2011). For Cana, emplacement came through mobility as she claimed “without a doubt I have seen more of Georgia than most Georgians... Well, I have lived in many locations here (referring to her numerous attempts to relocate to Georgia), that surely makes me

Georgian, or just as Georgian as any other” (Interview, July 2011).

While these struggles of supposed ethnic conflict are not indicative of a universal problem for Meskhetians, these encounters and the Meskhetians’ steadfast assertions that they too belong in Georgia portray a staunch reality: the lines of alterity established by the host societies in which the displaced find themselves solidify the importance of place and the ability to call it their own. As the painful reality of the Meskhetians’ 20th century demonstrates, the ability to have, as it were, a place that one could claim as their own, the concept of homeland, is important in that the alternative exposes susceptibility to occupational discrimination, harassment, arbitrary arrests, extortion or even further forced migration. Thus, asserting that people have always been mobile and that through the forces of globalization, mobility has become the mode of human existence, resulting in a de-territorialized identity, misses the experiences of my informants. For those who have been ‘uprooted’ from their places of origin and communities by violence, it is problematic to discuss the tenets of de-territorialization as it simply misses the realities that they encounter everyday (Kibreab1999). While this is an important realization, the merits of movement in the production of place cannot be ignored. Place is not found at only the beginning or end of movement, but rather, is defined by it in an ongoing process of ascription of meaning to material and cultural ‘stuff’ both stationary and not. It is only through this nexus of ongoing and complex trajectories and paths that place comes to be, as these elements do not only entail movement across place, but are indicative of its very existence.

CHAPTER 2

CHANGING PLACES: THE SPECTRE OF LOSS AND THE HOPE OF RENEWAL IN 'TRANSITION'

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought drastic changes to manifold quotidian processes and practices for all of its constituents and left many with a sense of being out of place. War and violence in the Caucasus and Central Asia caused the forced displacement of millions. Forced displacement however, is not only about spatial movement. As Kelly notes "... displacement... can also involve feelings of insecurity whilst staying still, as people find political and economic conditions changing around them" (2009, 37). Approximately 25 million ethnic Russian were culturally and politically displaced by the collapse of the Soviet Union, as overnight they constituted Russian ethnic minorities in each of the newly formed successor states (Pilkington 1998). While the perils wrought by the post-Soviet transition have been the focus of countless studies, few have envisioned this precarious period as displacement for those affected by it – and even less have focused on those who were perceived to be in their respective rightful place as the Soviet Union disbanded. Meskhetians were undoubtedly caught in a similar situation as they were transformed from Soviet citizens to minorities in the seven successor states that they inhabited almost overnight, as the Soviet Union collapsed around them.²²

²² As the Soviet Union collapsed there were Meskhetian populations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia.

Yet, what of those Russians who were living in their prescribed, rightful homeland, the Russian Federation? What of the Meskhetians who had already managed to return to their perceived points of origin within the Georgian SSR? Moreover, how do we reconcile the nostalgia and affiliation that many Meskhetians continue to hold for the Soviet state – the entity responsible for their deportation, protracted exile, and prolonged suffering? The effects of Soviet attempts to construct a society of individuals embodying its particular socio-economic and political visions vividly still resonate with the Meskhetians of Georgia. My informants' discourse – while maintaining vehemently their Meskhetian and Georgian identities – highlights their Soviet pasts and conflates them with a prosperous future by narrating the rigid, sharp shifts that have taken place in their present environment.

As Zetter states “the context of the present mediates the refugees’ perspectives on both the past and the future” (1999, 8). Indeed, faced with a plurality of uncertain trajectories in the present, my informants look to the Soviet past as a stabilizing mechanism that not only provides context and a shared sense of identity, but also serves to situate them with their Georgian counterparts, as they too are experiencing this displacement. The very same localities that Meskhetians find themselves in today are markedly different from what they were – as many highlighted through their stories, the environment that they presently inhabit is almost unrecognizable from that which it used to be. I argue that by viewing this transitional period for Meskhetian returnees as displacement we can not only better understand such narratives of affiliation with the Soviet state, but also highlight the congruency of the processes of displacement and emplacement.

Surely, as tame, regulated, and familiar places gave way to ‘wild’, chaotic, and unknown spaces in these polities one’s hold on being ‘in’ place gave way as well – creating a tendency to look both to the past and the future as potential stabilizing opportunities to find a place that could be called one’s own. Pelkmans (2006) argues that his respondents in post-Soviet Ajara were able to transcend the challenges of transition and their disillusionments with change by exerting confidence in a modern future that would eventually be tenable. “...By attaching new meanings to goods, people in Batumi could continue dreaming of modernity. By re-evaluating the goods they could preserve their confidence in a ‘modern future’ and direct their frustrations to real or imagined evils symbolized by ‘the mafia’ and ‘Turkey’” (2006, 175). I argue that the Meskhetians of Nasakirali and Ianeti also employ connotations of temporally different periods to reconcile their present situation and consolidate a positive discourse for the future. This is accomplished, however, not through the re-evaluation of goods, but rather a tacit acceptance that the places they inhabit are not what they used to be.

Many of my respondents’ narratives were framed through Soviet discourses of work, identity, and homeland. I argue these narratives, while often dismissed as simply nostalgic memories of a time portrayed as favourable to the present– or as in some cases, taken as affirmation of a lingering Soviet identity that surpasses all others²³ - are pivotal mechanisms of emplacement employed by Meskhetians to rectify their multiple senses of being out of place.²⁴ Indeed, the Soviet Union, despite, or due to, its authoritarian nature, produced such a place of familiarity and regulation. There is much in recent scholarship

²³ Tomlinson 2002

²⁴ Here I specifically refer to the deportation of 1944 and, what I argue, is the further displacement caused by the changing socio-political environment that the fall of the Soviet Union brought. My informants could only discuss the ‘second deportation’ from Uzbekistan that befell many Meskhetians vicariously.

that demonstrates the Soviet commitment to its constituent national minorities, and in turn how even those who would most be ill-affected by the early Soviet project were taken in and supported by its vehement, forward-looking drive to its self-ascribed modernity.²⁵ While no historical study examines how the Meskhetians related to or interacted with this Soviet project – before the deportation or in the aftermath of their exile to Central Asia – it is clear that my informants maintain a strong affinity to it, and continue to view it as an anchoring nodal point of their present-day existence.

Even after achieving supposed restoration by returning to their points of perceived origin, my informants continued to be susceptible to forces of displacement. The settlement patterns of Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia are largely congruent with the temporal period in which they were able to repatriate. Unlike the initial, and smaller, wave of immigration that took place between 1950 and 1969 directed on an individual basis primarily to Ajara and Gali – the second influx of returnees was largely directed by the state (Sumbadze 2007). As such, those who were able to settle permanently within Georgia during this second wave of return between 1970 and 1989 – approximately 50% of the current population of Meskhetians living in Georgia today – were sent to the villages of Nasakirali and Ianeti, where the Soviet state set to incorporate them into pre-existing systems of communal work (*ibid.*).

By tracing the paths of transition encountered and travelled by Meskhetians who have returned to Nasakirali and Ianeti, Georgia prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, this chapter further questions the relationship between movement and place, and illuminates the processes of situating oneself in a changing place while navigating tensions of newfound freedom and restriction – loss and renewal. It is within these two settlements

²⁵ See for example: Martin 2001; Slezkine 2000; Diener 2009

that the majority of my informants continue the ongoing process of reclaiming their homeland, and maintaining it despite the challenges posed to them by the uncertainties of transition.²⁶ In these communities Meskhetians had reclaimed their ability to emplace themselves in a location that is ‘theirs’ – only to lose it again, this time without physically moving across space. It was established in chapter one that place is constructed by the complex, interconnected trajectories of those both in stasis and motion. This chapter argues that displacement does not necessitate movement and can occur as those experiencing it remain stationary – even when they are bound to where they are thought to have the strongest of bonds to place, their perceived homeland.

“Before, This Place Used to be Better...Before There Used to be Work...”

Nasakirali, a small village in the Ozurgeti District of Guria, hosts the largest present-day settlement of Meskhetians in Georgia. The village, comprised of approximately 746 households, is home to just over 3,000 people (Sumbadze 2007). Upon their return, Meskhetians worked alongside Ajarans and Georgians at the local tea plantation.²⁷ My informants told me that they were initially housed in a hostel in the village, and only later did the state build houses for them – life was good, they assured me. The present situation is strikingly different. During the 1990s the tea plantation closed, and now lies in complete disrepair. As a result of their state built homes Meskhetians are largely sequestered to two collective spaces in Nasakirali - near the entrance of the village, and a secluded area, appropriately named *Kundzuli* (Island). Both

²⁶ While neither Nasakirali nor Ianeti is located in Samtskhe-Javakheti, for many these communities became the homeland, as movement to Samtskhe-Javakheti was restricted as part of a ‘forbidden border zone’.

²⁷ While it is debated as to whether Ajarans comprise a separate ethnic identity from their Georgian counterparts my informants stressed this distinction reifying Soviet typologies of demarcation based on, in this unique case, ethno-confessional difference. For more on Ajarans see Pelkmans 2006.

locations, while within the administrative limits of the village, render the Meskhetian population largely isolated.

Conversely, Ianeti's Ninth District, the second largest settlement of Meskhetians, is located in the Samtredia District of Imereti, and exists in complete separation from any other village. Its inhabitants are almost completely cut off from their Georgian counterparts – the closest community is located some five kilometres away. Whereas Nasakirali incorporates – although compartmentalized and sequestered from one another – Ajaran, Georgian, and Meskhetian populations, Ianeti's Ninth District is home to only Meskhetians. Ianeti was constructed to house workers of a stockbreeding farm during the early 1980s. Meskhetians were offered the opportunity to work on the farm and live with fellow workers (*ibid.*). Meskhetians were initially housed in a hostel in nearby Jikhaishi, and only later were afforded homes by the state. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union the farm was closed, rendering my informants victim to unemployment and isolation.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork in the two communities, respondents regardless of age, gender, or social standing offered an omnipresent discourse that lamented time gone by – a time that was premised on virtue, equality, and prosperity. “In my opinion, it was much better before,” or the self-assured “life was just easier then,” were stated at almost every interview conducted for this study. Yet, such simple and definitive statements tell us more about complex, tenuous narratives of attachment to the present than steadfast accuracy in recalling the past. It has been argued that such nostalgic narratives mitigate the realities of a sparse and precarious present as they imply, “some hope, albeit muted, of the possibility of relief,” (Ries 1997, 112, quoted in

Tomlinson 2002). As scholars have noted, this nostalgia for the vestiges of a communist past centres around a sense of pride in labour and production; being a perceived integral part of a project that strives for modernity, however it may have been viewed; and the loss of the omnipotent security that the state offered (Todorova 2010, 5 and 7). Indeed, my respondents employed such laments for the past in attempts to make sense of their turbulent contemporary environments– to express nostalgia for a place that no longer exists.

If before was better, then now has to be worse. Much of the discourse that permeates narratives in Nasakirali and Ianeti centred on the spectre of loss and the inability to control the seemingly unstoppable forces that were perpetuating it. As the tea plantation in Nasakirali and the communal farm in Ianeti closed, with remnants of their respective infrastructures all but completely gone – along with the work and way of life they provided – the everyday certainties that were defined through routine gave way to disorder. A common focal point of this narrative revolved around the consumption and availability of goods. One woman from Nasakirali stated “before there was fruit, there were vegetables, there was clothing, anything you could ever want, it was there. Now what is there? Yes, we grow what we can, but this is very little,” (Interview, August 2011). She went on to say “everyone used to have work; we all collected tea. It was not good work – it was hard. But, all the same, it was work! Now there is nothing here” (*ibid.*).

Another woman, when asked about her experiences in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, answered “it was good, we lived really well there. Life was easier; it was easier to study, easier to work. When we moved to Kyrgyzstan, my mother and father worked.

Everyone worked. I worked in a store there. How many years I worked in that store. I worked in a market too. But here, here there is nothing. Life was easier there” (Interview, August 2011). This, however, was followed by a quick reprisal, in which she employed the Soviet lexicon to solidify the importance and sanctity of homeland in her narrative, as she continued “but, all the same, this is my homeland (*rodina*). There, the entire time (that we were in Kyrgyzstan), it was never my homeland”.

In Ianeti, similar stories of physical loss resonated widely as one respondent exhumed after some contemplation, “you know what? What Gorbachev tried to bring, we wanted no part of. Absolutely, I have good memories of the Soviet Union. Everything worked better. The fields were better; the produce was better. We could go on vacation. Yes, I have very good memories of my childhood, but of course this is, how do you say, nostalgia for the past” (Interview, August 2011). At the mention of nostalgia, another spoke up “it was better before! This is a fact! Work was better, everyone had work, and because of this everyone was better” (Interview, August 2011).

Meskhetian identification as self-affirmed good, trustworthy workers – a discourse largely shaped by their Soviet past – reiterate these discourses of loss and better times. The Soviet authorities believed that labour possessed a certain redemptive and transformative quality.²⁸ By incorporating would-be incompatible elements into the larger fabric of Soviet society – giving those questionable sects a stake in the creation and sustainment of the Soviet project – authorities sought to shape and contextualize narratives of existence, and to influence conceptions of success and prosperity. As one informant proudly stated,

²⁸ See for example: Barnes, 2011; Kotkin, 1997

This is to say we are a very industrious (*trudolyubiviy*) people. In whichever country or republic we have lived, we demonstrated that we are industrious, that we are honest. For example, in Azerbaijan, Azerbaijanis are a little, well... when we arrived to the region they trusted us. They would not trust their own (fellow) Azerbaijanis, but they trusted us. The entire time we paid that what we owed, and because of this they trusted us, (Interview, August 2011).

Another informant mentioned “we want to live honestly, to work honestly, to spend every moment honestly like before. We want to live normally like normal people, but it feels like we are moving backwards” (Interview, August 2011). This statement highlights the conflation of the stable past with a prosperous future. The latter, in a utopic sense, is in this case defined through the attainment of work as it was in the past. Normalcy is equated with work ‘as it used to be’.

Among my informants this former mode of being was not often based on memories of life in Meskheta, but more so found in the landscapes forged by their deportation and exile in Central Asia. Pohl (2008) argues that the Meskhetians welcomed and accepted the notion of labour as a mainstay of successful life so vehemently that it was to their detriment. As, he claims, the ‘industrious’ nature of the Meskhetians was indeed the root cause of their protracted exile (2008). Unlike the resistant peoples of the North Caucasus and Kalmyks, the Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, and Meskhetians proved to be more dependable and a much needed source of labour in strategic areas of potential development, hitherto hindered by limited manpower (*ibid.*). While how much this influenced their protracted exile is debatable, it is clear that my informants have internalized a number of ascribed qualities forged through Soviet values in order to further articulate their identity.

Narratives that depict the situation that befell the Meskhetians in 1944, and their survival of it, speak to a number of traits that I was ensured were inherent to the

Meskhethian character. When asked to explain the substance of this “Meskhethianess”, one respondent said with a degree of both admiration and sadness,

How do I explain this? It is not right to ask for mercy (*milost*). For us, a person who has nothing...we have pride, such a pride, Meskhethian pride, you understand? (For us) It is better to die of hunger at home than to ask something of someone. We need to work, serve with our strengths, and eat the fruit of our labours, nothing more than this. Yet, we should never leave those that do not have without. This is the Meskhethian pride that our elders have taught us, (Interview, August 2011).

He went on to explain that this was both a product of their experience of deportation and exile, but also something innately Meskhethian that allowed them to not only persevere, but excel under the Soviet system as they came to know it in Central Asia. “After the deportation we stayed as close as we could to one another, even though this was difficult. That is the type of people we are. We live compactly, we survive compactly, and we help each other as such” (*ibid.*).

This institution of compact, communal living, while initially employed as a self-preserving measure in exile, is presently used as a mechanism to sustain the ‘cultural inventory’ of the Meskhethians as it serves to symbolically construct and sustain a Soviet past that has given way to less amicable social realities. Present tensions and xenophobic tendencies produce a stark contrast to the “friendship of peoples” parlance that was commonplace in all of the locations that Meskhethians inhabited up until the late 1980s.

“In the time of the Soviet Union, it’s true to say that people lived better. Friendship was better. Friendship between all the republics, all of the peoples was better” stated one informant (Interview, August 2011). Another added, “after Gorbachev, everything started to go wrong. The wars started. People in Georgia fought among themselves, people in Kyrgyzstan fought among themselves, in every corner there was

war. For me, it was better when the Soviet Union existed” (Interview, August 2011). Another stressed that the forces responsible for dictating the new socio-economic and political parameters of Nasakirali and Ianeti were causing Meskhetians to lose the communal traits that up to this point were viewed as paramount to their survival. She stated “today, the economic situation has made (our) people unsympathetic. Now we possess a callousness (*grubost*) that did not exist before. This is our reality now. This place has made us hard” (Interview, August 2011). This last statement strives to convince not only that the present environment in which the Meskhetians of Nasakirali and Ianeti find themselves has deteriorated the ‘pride’ of their character, but also that these forces, responsible for such deterioration, exist beyond their control.

Many of my informants view the everyday existences of Meskhetians that predated their exile, whether they directly experienced it or not, and past work habits as things they could control. Conversely, the present seems to exist beyond such tenable abilities. As expressed above, this has resulted in a lack of perceived agency. During a casual conversation one informant was asked if he had plans to ever move again to which he responded,

We would love to buy a new home, somewhere better. We want to move to Akhaltsikhe. But, to do this we would need to sell this home. Who would want to move here? Here onions do not grow, cabbage does not grow, carrots do not grow, absolutely nothing grows here. Maybe if the land was better we would be able to sell our home, but I do not think that is possible now (Interview, August 2011).

Focusing on more quotidian problems, he continued “forget being able to buy a new home. To be able to buy, even smaller things... now one has to sell their television, their telephone; well this telephone does not even work” (*ibid.*)! Another respondent from Nasakirali expressed similar feelings of helplessness and futility when asked of the

importance of participating in regional politics. “Of course, it matters to me. When I filled out the documents, and they did not give me my pension, absolutely it was important”! He continued with disheartened indignation recalling his attempts with both national and local authorities to secure his pension “when I enquired with local authorities they asked me why I should rely on them. I said, because when I asked those in Tbilisi they said I needed to. They (the local authorities) said no, that is not the case. Here (in Georgia), Tbilisi is one state and Guria is another. It did not used to be this way you know” (Interview, August 2011). His answer speaks to the diminished position that Meskhetians find themselves in, especially in relation to the bureaucratic process and political institutions of Georgia. It also highlights the changing politics of place. According to him, the regional and political apparatuses of Guria were bound much tighter to those of Tbilisi during the Soviet Union. “There used to be a dialogue,” he continued, “now they do not speak to each other, this is very clear. Just look around” (*ibid.*)! My informant’s depiction of the changing socio-political landscape implies more than just the inability to procure a pension in a newly independent Georgia. Rather, it stresses a lack of personal control over, and inclusion in, these changes – these shifting landscapes of socio-political power are perceived to oppressively dictate the trajectories of my informants’ lives.

Nostalgia for a better past was not only founded on the tangible loss of work, commodities, or the ability to purchase them, but also a perceived loss of freedom and choice. While one intuitively equates the fall of the Soviet Union with newfound freedoms and possibilities, many of my respondents noted the manifold restrictions and

impediments they now faced. One of my informants, when asked whom he socializes with responded,

With neighbours, friends, and my children. But, it doesn't work to go somewhere to relax or take a small vacation – this is simply not an option... we do not have the ability to make such choices. To work or to study? There is no choice here, not now, not like earlier... before my son went to the *politekhnik* in Samtredia until it closed in the 90s. He had no choice but to leave, there was nothing for him here, (Interview, August 2011).

Here the perceived fetters of the present are juxtaposed with the freedoms that the past offered. As he continued “I would love to see my grandson get an education here in Georgia, or anywhere for that matter! Education is important. Although we need to work, this is absolutely necessary – if for nothing else, money” (*ibid.*).

In and out of Place

The lack of agency expressed above manifested itself in the absence of choice of education and work, but also through restrictions of movement – paths that were, according to my informants, accessible during the Soviet era. Thus, it was not spatial movement, but its very restriction, that caused my informants' sense of displacement during Georgia's transitional period. The forces that kept the Meskhetians of Nasakirali and Ianeti in place were the very same that enabled them to feel disconnected from it. Newfound political divisions and borders, economic disenfranchisement, and tenuous relationships with counterparts both at home and away all served to lock Meskhetians in place – as for most movement remains if not impossible extremely difficult along most paths.²⁹ This displacement through coerced stasis presents itself in diverse settings – from navigating the realities of travel around their communities to newly imposed

²⁹ It should be noted that as a caveat to this argument, chapter 4 deals specifically with the movement of Meskhetians who live in Nasakirali and Ianeti along specific paths to Turkey.

technologies of control and the border regimes that regulate them. These limitations on movement have drastic effects on the lives of my informants as they dictate their ability to go to school, attain medical treatment, purchase and sell produce and items at markets both local and international, and visit family and friends both residing in Georgia and abroad. Indeed, attempts to solidify people in place have only served to instil a more tenuous connection to it.

Restrictions of movement range from small and mundane journeys of the everyday to larger and less commonly taken voyages. In Nasakirali the *marshrutka* service during the Soviet era was a constant, reliable means of transportation for those living on the fringes of the village to commute to the centre. It is now defined by its irregularity. “Some days it does not run at all, and never when it is convenient” one respondent said, echoing a common sentiment (Interview, August 2011). This makes even the most banal acts that require movement cumbersome. As one informant stated “everyday my son has to walk three kilometres there and back just to go to school! From here it is almost impossible to get to the hospital. If you are sick you have to walk three kilometres on foot to get there. It is the same for the market. To be perfectly honest, it is very difficult here. It is very difficult to live here” (Interview, August 2011).

In Ianeti, issues of everyday travel present even further difficulties. While the community has a Georgian school located within easy reach of all its inhabitants, the attainment of other services is more difficult. As mentioned, the Meskhetians of Ianeti live in complete isolation from other surrounding villages, the closest of which is some five kilometres away. After the communal farm closed the Georgians who worked there quickly abandoned the settlement by moving to surrounding villages. Their leave was

followed by a lack of focus on industrial and infrastructural development, as the Meskhetian settlement was largely forgotten – the results of which have left them isolated, and without easy access to surrounding markets or other sources of livelihood. Many of my informants felt that this was a result of their perceived difference from ethnic Georgians. As one questioned “we are all citizens of Georgia! Why are we not treated the same? Why is there no running natural gas here, when only a few kilometres away there is? It makes you question things” (Interview, August 2011).

A theme that ran throughout the stories offered by my respondents invoked the importance of family. The reality was that, despite the important place these people had in their lives, for one reason or another it was felt that these relationships were becoming increasingly impossible to maintain. One elderly man in Nasakirali, when asked about his ability to stay connected with his family that lived elsewhere, stated amid tears “my oldest son drives a truck. It’s been a long time since he has been able to visit and I cannot visit him. He is very busy, and now with the border being closed, the war, poor relations between Russia and Georgia – well...he has not been here since” (Interview, August 2011). Another respondent lamented that before “we could visit Central Asia every year; I could visit my parents. It was easier then. Now, my brother sent me money, and last year I saw my father for the first time in twelve years. My mother passed away long ago already. Until last year I have not seen any of my relatives in twelve years! I cannot afford a plane ticket! This is how we live now” (Interview, August 2011). Monetary deficiencies and the realities of unregulated market economies do not present the only constraints to movement. As another respondent stated “before it was easier to travel, one was free to travel to Russia. You did not need a visas or papers.

Why do we need such things now” (Interview, August 2011)? Indeed, the newfound border regimes of the Soviet successor states prove, in some cases, insurmountable hurdles.

Looking beyond the bonds of local restrictions of movement, many Meskhetians who strive to go beyond the borders of Georgia for one reason or another also incur a multiplicity of hindrances that affect their choices and abilities to move to destinations that are now found beyond international borders. It should be noted that given the transnational nature of the Meskhetian diaspora caused by their numerous resettlements, many have strong, assorted connections to places other than Georgia along with the people that continue to reside there. Countless informants mentioned the fond memories they still carry of their time in Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. For many, moving to Georgia entailed painful decisions of leaving friends and family. In most cases the decision came with an understanding that reclaiming a lost past meant limiting these relationships. This reality was only compounded in the wake of the Soviet collapse; for if synapses of connectivity were weak under the Soviet regime there is a general sentiment among my informants that they have largely been severed since its fall.

The newfound citizenship regimes encountered after the fall of the Soviet Union is a source of complexity and frustration for Meskhetians. It is omnipotent in their lives. Even such banal, quotidian events as paying respects to lost loved ones are contingent on it. As one exasperated informant said in frustration “now I have to go to Azerbaijan, where my father and mother died. Do I have the right papers? Are my passports in order? How should I know? Forget that! Do you know how much money it costs to get there and return? How am I supposed to do that? At least before we did not need

passports” (Interview, August 2011)! Passport and citizenship regimes, while promoted as a measure of security, stability, and inclusion by local authorities, have instead instilled a sense of anxiety, potential restriction, and exclusion for my informants, many of whom do not possess Georgian citizenship. As one questioned “how long a person can live here and still not be considered worthy of a Georgian passport I cannot say. How can a person already living here (in Georgia) for years still not have citizenship? It can’t be this way. I know someone who has lived here for seven years and finally at the end of his seventh year he received his citizenship. This is not right” (Interview, August 2011)!

He went on to tell me about another individual living in Akhaltsikhe who has lived there for three years without citizenship as it demonstrated the injustice of the system he alluded to earlier. “His friends, Georgian friends, ask him how is it that he is able to find work here without citizenship. He replies, I am a citizen of Georgia without citizenship,” after enjoying his friend’s seemingly indifferent attitude to his situation, my informant continued “it’s difficult though, as he has relatives in Azerbaijan and Russia. He cannot visit them. He cannot leave Georgia. His wife’s father is gravely ill, (he) calls and calls, everyday he calls, but he cannot go to him, as he still has not attained a Georgian passport” (Interview, August 2011). After which I was assured that it was ‘not all bad’ for my informant’s friend as “he is able to work. He is a doctor and he lives well in Akhaltsikhe, it is just... he should be free to go where he wants” (*ibid.*).

This ambivalence to his friend’s current situation highlights a notion that was seldom overtly expressed, but often implied: that in spite of their turbulent present, there was promise of a more prosperous future. I was assured that eventually his friend will attain citizenship, he will be able to travel at his convenience, and for the interim he will

continue to live well. “All things equal” I was assured “he is in his homeland. How bad could life be” (*ibid.*)? Another added “sure, all of us do not have citizenship yet, but, God willing, we will. Until then, we will continue to live well here” (Interview, August 2011).

What Are we Guilty of? Trying to Make Sense of Uncertainty

Though many of my informants perceive the process of transition as a changing socio-political and economic environment marred with coercive forces that push them toward backwardness and poverty – a place characterized by inferiority, immorality, and insecurity - they also see it as one of opportunity, and potential newly established freedom. Indeed, Soviet ‘certainties’, as Pelkmans states “... were based on ideologies that have since evaporated, on an iron curtain that has lost its physical rigidity, and on a state that has given up many of its former functions” (2006, 5). This newfound sense of vapidness – while full of multiple uncertainties, also allows for new avenues of discovery. As Brown states,

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has clearly created a social, political, and economic upheaval. We misread the situation however, if we slip into thinking of this situation as entirely, qualitatively new or expressly chaotic. The post-Soviet societies are not a chaotic space... They are environments with their own rough logic – their own hierarchies of strategies, habits, and priorities, (1998, 627).

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, the fall of the Soviet Union has also allowed them opportunity to reclaim their past while pursuing a future. Just as it has been claimed that politics can counteract chaos through the exertion of power, Meskhetians seek to rectify their current dislocation by actively seeking to emplace themselves both within ancient Meskheta and present-day Georgia (Humphrey 2002). For my informants,

it offers what many of them claim to be the first opportunity to truly be in possession of their own history.

As one respondent stated “I do not need to tell you about the unease caused by the police, the NKVD, or the KGB right up until Gorbachev. As you can imagine, it was anything but peaceful. Before, it was always, you cannot go there, you cannot build that, you cannot do this, and so forth. I am not a slave anymore, I am free” (Interview, August 2011). He went on to say “I can live here, build a home here because there is peace, there is freedom. Of course, life would be better if we had work, but this is a start” (*ibid.*).

Another, at the mention of this newfound freedom, concurred by stating “of course, I have great memories of my family, my mother, playing as a child, but when I remember when authorities would say you do not have the right to work here – well, that is something entirely different – something much worse” (*ibid.*). This newfound hope and the possibility of renewal that it represented was present among many informants. Upon discussing the merits of the Soviet Union an informant was asked what the most noticeable change was in their lives since its demise, to which he responded,

The most important difference for me is the freedom that we now have. We are a free people now. Look! You were able to come here freely! This would not have been possible during the Soviet era. A person from any nationality can come and study me, and if I want I could study people from any nationality. Communication between nations, at times, is easier now than before... Look, after the Soviet Union there was violence, terrible violence – even genocide. This is not to say that there was not Genocide under the Soviets too. God knows that we saw such brutality (*zverstvo*). Nor is this to say that we are passed such violence, but we have hope - and under Saakashvili things have been better. God willing this will continue. Peace and freedom – Georgia absolutely needs these in order to progress. We need these to progress (Interview, August 2011).

This reifies that transition did not exactly constitute a watershed moment, as one respondent clarified “freedom not only evaded us under the Soviet Union, but also during

the times of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze. There was absolutely no freedom for us with them” (Interview, August 2011). Rather, it constitutes an ever-shifting landscape – one in which the Meskhetians of Georgia seek to ensure their emplacement.

This endeavour to emplace themselves is not without its challenges. While consensus remains elusive regarding the Meskhetians’ initial deportation from Meskheti in 1944, the act in itself signifies an affirmation of their supposed guilt – whatever it entails. Labels of subversives, potential fifth columns, and transgressors only served to solidify this guilt in official Soviet and Georgian discourses – narratives that still linger today.

Both Georgian and Meskhetian scholars note that relations between the Muslim and Christian populations during the 1930s were relatively cordial. Many Meskhetians were employed in the creation and daily undertakings of the kolkhoz system – a reality that many recall with pride (Mamedov and Yusupova in *Tak Eto Bylo* 1990). The communal farm system was largely left only after 1941 when almost all male Meskhetians of able age were mobilized to the front for the war effort (Alieva in *Tak Eto Bylo* 1990). Many wilfully went to the defence of the “fatherland” when it required their assistance and recount their service with dignity.³⁰ This discourse of belonging acts as a mechanism of emplacement – an albeit limited display of power in defining the contours of place.³¹ It allows my informants to dispute the charges laid before them and challenge the justifications for their deportation. These stories, through limited means, enable

³⁰ See Yusupova 1990. This pride was also found among informants as Cana claimed that if she were able she would have fought alongside the Georgian forces during the 2008 conflict with Russia. Vadim, Dervim’s son, also expressed fond memories of his military service for the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

³¹ For more on this consult Jansen and Lofving 2009.

Meskhetyans to draw a connection between themselves and the territory they were removed from, while securing the unstable environment they currently inhabit.

As many of my informants stressed, they still do not possess their own history, claiming that they were appointed one with little factual accuracy. “What are we guilty of? My uncles were at the front! They fought the Germans; they were defending Georgia! They were defending the Soviet Union” one respondent claimed boisterously (Interview, August 2011). Another pondered aloud “what were we guilty of? Why did they punish us so vehemently? Why did they remove us from the land we are rooted in” (Interview, August 2011)? As a prolific Meskhetyan author claimed “now I am back with my children, without shelter, without a place on this earth. What for? Why have we become homeless? Who is to blame, that we have been left with no homeland? Indeed, are we the worst of all? What are we guilty of? Give us our homeland! Bring us home” (*Tak Eto Bylo* 1990, 379).

These important questions, according to my informants, are now given the intellectual space they need to be properly addressed. “Maybe now, now that we have returned to Georgia and are free we can hope that our children will have their own history. For me, this is the most important thing” one respondent claimed (Interview, July 2011). For my informants in Nasakirali and Ianeti, loyalty to, and pride for, the Soviet state that encompassed their homeland not only served as a firm historical anchor with which to ground themselves amid their chaotic present, but also as a means of ensuring their futures even in a post-Soviet era.

It is amid these Soviet-framed narratives that my informants attempt to make sense of and navigate through an existence without the Soviet Union. This discourse acts

as a platform that allows the Meskhetians of Georgia to express a historical disposition that is shared with their Georgian counterparts. Yet, it also allows for an expression of seemingly acceptable alterity in a state where ethno-confessional differences are so heavily politicized. By highlighting differences that can be seen through a Soviet prism, the Meskhetians of Georgia both yearn for the perceived comforts of a place that no longer exists as well as articulate their own identity through a framework that is deemed appropriate within the polity of post-Soviet Georgia.

Moreover, while nostalgia for the Soviet Union among those interviewed for this project may be the result of the acute political and socio-economic challenges put forth by processes of transition, it also recognizes that the places of Nasakirali and Ianeti as they existed during the Soviet Union have irreparably changed, causing tension and anxiety. Though, these places remain in flux; their stories are not yet finished. Just as the places that Nasakirali and Ianeti have come to embody are reportedly unrecognizable from what they once were, they too continue to change as my informants continue to exist not completely 'in' or 'out' of these places. As an informant in Nasakirali most aptly addressed the ambivalence felt toward these changing places, by commenting on issues of Meskhetian integration into Georgian society, he stated,

It is interesting – the idea of integration. But, what exactly are we integrating to? This is the question – to Georgian culture? Orthodox Christianity? Maybe, but Georgia is trying to integrate itself too. It wants to be located closer to Europe –to find a European answer to its dilemmas, but they have not integrated with Europe yet. And we are supposed to integrate to this nation? Thus, integration becomes a two-staged, or three-staged process. This means we have to integrate to this (the Georgian nation) and as it changes, we will need to integrate to something new. Please, give us the address of this 'integration' and then we will discuss the manner of which we will get there (Interview, August 2011)

This search for the 'proper address' of where he feels Meskhetians in Georgia need to arrive betrays a perceived incomplete process of emplacement. By his own admission Meskhetians need to find the location of their proper position within the Georgian polity, a process that is only compounded as Georgia continues to change itself. This belies the fact that emplacement and displacement need to be viewed as mutually exclusive entities. Rather, the lines between them need to be blurred. It holds that future instances of both processes will surely and congruently befall my informants – even if they remain spatially still. The contours that comprise the places they inhabit will remain indefinitely in flux giving rise to new disruptions and opportunities.

CHAPTER 3

BACK TO THE FUTURE? RETURN MIGRATION AND THE JOURNEY OF HOME

Residing some three kilometres away from the centre of the village of Nasakirali, a single dirt road separates a long line of houses aligned in apparent symmetry, congruent with what one would expect from Soviet planned accommodations. As chapter two detailed, most cannot fail to notice the drastic transformation of Nasakirali from its Soviet antecedent. Thus, perhaps fittingly, there is an evident obstruction in the midst of this preordained display of rural dwellings. The beginnings of a new house have taken shape, breaking the mould of those Soviet precursors that surround it— presenting a visual challenge to the uniformity and aged disposition of its surrounding predecessors. Moreover, in addition to the immediate attention the largely undeveloped structure demands in contrast to its regulated surroundings, it also, very aptly, serves as a symbol of the myriad, continuing processes and challenges that have come to solidify the identity of Meskhetians in rural Georgia, culminating in their plight to forge new modalities of existence and places to call their own.

The village of Nasakirali – not unlike the rest of Guria – is characterized by underdevelopment, poverty, and uncertainty. Like many of the other settlements that host the majority of the Meskhetian population in Georgia, it exists outside the limits of what once constituted historical Meskheti. Yet, it is in these settings that my informants have sought to make their respective homes. Soviet legacies of ethnic institutionalization and narratives of essentialized linkages bounding people in particular places which continue to dominate discourse in the polity of Georgia constructs a rich context in which

to look at processes of place making. These narratives are used by my informants to justify their tenuous hold on place even as they induce tension with, and in some cases outright contradiction to, the sedentarist discourse they employ in attempts to solidify their emplacement in the polity of Georgia – the idea that return implies going home.

In an argument of the need to adopt an unattached discourse of home, Warner (1994) asserts that forced migrants are seen to offer one of the staunchest oppositions to the established sedentarist order, as they move, in some cases indefinitely, in response to coercive push factors and seemingly defy the spatial constraints of the nation-state system. He argues that they challenge the established lines of symmetry and order that govern our conventional modalities of existence. As Warner notes “the refugee's return to home, and our desire to prioritize that return, are all our desires to return to a world of alignments and symmetries. Refugees and non-refugees wish to be in a world of equations and alignments, a world that ... never was” (1994, 68). In other words, refugees represent a rift that we wish to deny is present in all of us.

“The situation of the refugee away from 'home',” Warner argues, “is the incarnation of the homelessness that is part of all our experience. To say that we are all refugees, or in Ezrahi’s wonderful phrase ‘in a world in which everyone is a tourist’, is to recognize that the situation of homelessness does not have to be only physical” (1994, 168). The implicit underpinning of this conceptualization is that since there is no need for people to belong to a specific place, the idea of return 'home' or repatriation as constituting a solution to the problem of displacement is a misconception. It implies that there was never a home in the first place.

Despite this notion of omnipotent homelessness, scholars who investigate the

implications of return have made serious inroads in exploring the multiple possible meanings of 'home', 'homeland', and 'homecoming' (Warner 1994; Koser and Black 1999; Markowitz 2004; Stefansson 2004). Diener postulates that home and homeland embody both spatial and temporal contingencies, which, at a macro level, seek to, "...physically/materially and ontologically / psychologically sustain groups of human beings that regard themselves as bound together by culture and possess a collective consciousness of obligation and unity," (2009, 17). As Koser and Black write, home "...can represent a return to the refugee's country of origin; but more generally, it is seen as more specific than that, involving the place of origin, perhaps the refugee's own house or land that was abandoned at the time of flight' and may be imbued with social, cultural, spiritual, or economic values (1999, 7).

But how does this account for a Meskhetian population that more often than not can plot their diverse places of birth in Central Asia?³² Such manifold points of origin complicate the promotion of the promised destination of home as put forth by my informants, as they raise the question of where exactly this destination lies, and the contours of precisely what it should include.

Thus far, this thesis has sought to explore and complicate how Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia conceptualize and interact with the places that they have come to inhabit, those that they have left behind, and those that they seek to establish – and how in turn these places have influenced them. In this chapter the focus of examination turns to the particularities of these relationships with place as they are articulated through the idea of home. Thus, analytically, I argue that the concept of home, especially in the case of my informants, can be more completely understood as a process – or as Mallet

³² Only two of my informants were born in Georgia prior to the deportation of 1944.

(2004) has argued, a journey. A journey that adheres to diverse conjunctures of times, places, and societal connections – ultimately negotiated on an individual basis.

As previously mentioned, a large body of literature affirms the saliency of the connection between people and place. A nostalgic representation of a homeland lost by forced migrants has been documented across diverse settings throughout time. This factor is undeniably acute in the Caucasus. As the Meskhetians frame their conceptions of home and homeland around places that they have forcibly been removed from, ethnically Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) also articulate their identity through such lost places. Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck (2010) make the claim that for Georgian IDPs, their former home of Abkhazia represents an invaluable element of identity for those that were ejected during the civil wars of the 1990s. This identity is buttressed by the state through official discourse and policy, and it is through this identity that the IDPs of Georgia construct their notion of home. The authors state “there is clear evidence that the identity of the displaced is often grounded in the places they were displaced from, their old homes, even after many years” (2010, 316). For these Georgian IDPs, maintaining their memories of Abkhazia as a coping mechanism allows them to mitigate the uncertainties of their protracted, present displacement – highlighting, “how integral an Abkhazian place-identity is to their sense of self, not despite their displacement, but precisely because of it” (*ibid.*, 316). Thus, victims of forced migration view the restitution of their identity, their ability to reclaim a self-ascribed sense of normalcy, as contingent on their return to the places they were forced to leave – even if their supposed innate ties to them become somewhat tenuous.³³

³³ Refer to chapter 1. Specifically to the ambiguity that Devrim, Cana, and Camil have regarding where exactly their proper places are.

Indeed, of the three “durable” solutions that most in policy and academia have established for the restitution of forced migrants, repatriation has been given precedent over integration and resettlement. Such consensus on the primacy of repatriation and its emphasis on return has been established for a number of reasons (Ray 2000; Warner 1994), but perhaps most important among them is the idealistic and perceived stabilizing logic that underpins policymakers’ decisions. Although, the process of repatriation is often hastily carried out with little attention to important details that shape the nature of such policies – such as acceptance of those would-be returnees by locals, the realities and limitations of the localities in question.

Yet, with this lack of comprehension, policy makers and academics, under the semblance of humanitarian logic have, since the end of the Cold War, time and again, championed voluntary repatriation as a fundamental right that should be awarded to all forced migrants, implying that place of origin is a formative aspect of their existence. It is seen as affording the right to return home, though the details of what this constitutes are ominously vague. For Meskhetians, these rights were first articulated as their plight made its international, if brief, debut in the 1996 Confederation of Independent States (CIS) Conference, where it was stated that, “persons belonging to formerly deported people have the right to voluntarily return including ensuring transit travel, uninhibited transportation of property which belongs to them and assistance in integrating in their historical homeland” (CISCONF 1996, quoted in Tomlinson 2002, 18). This statement solidified the importance of return, while largely ignoring the nuances of location so pertinent to its success.

The Journey (of) Home

The methods in which such narratives of home are interpreted among policy makers miss the complex trajectories that embody its place, and fail to account for the fact that almost all Meskhetians live outside their perceived historic points of origin – regardless of how vehemently they stress the importance of their homeland. Moreover, these methods reductively assume a duality of place: here and there – solidifying these concepts as immutable categories. Those policy makers and ethnic entrepreneurs who maintain the sedentarist paradigm fail to account for the manifold ways in which place is experienced and internalized. Indeed, these statements of affirmation regarding the ‘recapturing of a lost cultural inventory’ through the creation of home, even when it involves the making of home in places that are also more ‘there’ than ‘here’ serves to complicate the distinction between traditionally held notions of home as merely constituting a bounded, physical place in which someone lives. For my informants, this is realized and demonstrated as many have begun and continue to construct and negotiate the entity of home both within and outside of the parameters of historical Meskheta.

Rather than such a rigid dichotomization, the lines between here and there need to be blurred (Ahmed, Castaneda, and Fortie 2003, 4). By questioning where ‘here’ ends and ‘there’ begins, and what each of these entail, it becomes possible to view these nodal points of orientation in terms that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As Zetter argues “home is a living organism of relationships and traditions stretching back into the past... The house distills the history and life of the family which is lost by enforced exile” (1999, 12).

Home as a journey recognizes the salience of both points of origin and potential destinations (Mallet 2004). Though home is located in space, it does not necessarily embody a space of fixity, nor is it fixed in specific space (Douglas 1991). Rather, individuals inhabit a constant environment of transition and change, as points of origin – regardless of the validity of such claims – give way to, and exist in unison with, prospective, idealized homes that exist in the future (Kabachnik et al. 2010. 317). Often theorists and those who are displaced assert that this can only be ascertained through the act of return – even if it is evidently impossible (Zetter 1999). However, if the journey does indeed come to an end, would this not also signify the conclusion of the existence of home as well? Indeed, the process of home making does not end upon return – even if this return entails securing a place that is to a perceived as both a point of origin and the site of a prosperous future; to view movement and the creation of home as a linear or even cyclical process misses the more complex ways in which home is solidified and challenged through an intricate meshwork of paths. Home encompasses movement, and is not established outside of it. It encompasses the familiar, but also the strange and unknown.

These vectors are not solely derived from the locality, but also shaped and influenced by those who inhabit it, and their interactions with others. As Ahmed states, “‘homes’ always involve encounters between those who stay, those who arrive, and those who leave... There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation” (1999, 340). These encounters define the contours of home. The interactions with those who were left behind, those to be found in new points of destination, and those who make this journey together coalesce and form

modalities of continuity and disjuncture. It is through this complex system of interaction that notions of the past, present, and future are both seamlessly brought together and segmented.

For Al-Rashid (1994), forced migration creates a dislocation in not only place, but also temporality. Return and repatriation, regardless of the connotations in which they are realized, are thought to deconstruct the ‘double nostalgia’ that demands a focus on the past and future evident while in exile (Al-Rashid, 1994). Just as the Georgian IDPs thought of their home existing solely outside of the present – only to be rectified by their potential return to Abkhazia one day – the Meskhetians, in their repatriation, have come to inhabit a place where their homes can once again embody the present, however diverse these locations may be.

In reclaiming their historic points of origin, they can once again create a home in, what Heller terms, the “absolute present” (1995, 2). The phrasing signifies a newfound omnipotence of the present and an abandonment of the past and future – the former no longer being relevant and the latter rendered undetermined and ambivalent. For Chowder (2002), Heller’s concept of the temporal isolation of home proves myopic. He argues that the concept of home exists in multiple temporalities simultaneously. Giving credence to such conceptions of multiple temporal existences, my informants, through their narratives champion the conflation of the past, present, and future in the construction of their homes. Just as home can be regarded as a stative verb, rather than a noun (Mallet 2004, 79) – a state of being not necessarily bounded to a specific place – it too evades the fetters of a singular temporal positioning.

Home is not perceived as a static, stand-alone entity – existing solely in the present or outside of time. As the narratives of the Meskhetian community of Georgia illustrate, the notion that return to Georgia constitutes the end of a linear journey is misleading – the negotiation and construction of home in Georgia only serves to produce a multiplicity of newfound trajectories. The foundations of the home being built in Nasakirali, mentioned on the first pages of this chapter, symbolize this, as they demand recognition of the multidimensional processes of home making that are present amid such journeys of ‘return’. While repatriation to Georgia allows my informants to attach new appreciation and attention to the present as place and time for home, it does not preclude the incorporation of both the past and the future into its composition. Indeed, many of my informants carry the experiences of the past with them, as they continue to inform not only their present situation, but also shape their potential futures. To reduce home to a linear construct, one with a definitive point of inception and conclusion, or to view it in temporal isolation without recognizing the myriad ways it connects both the past and future with the present hinders an understanding of how it resonates with those that live through this journey.

My informants often lamented that, while their homes in Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and Russia were perhaps not ideal for a number of reasons – not least of which were the physical structures and their spatial locations – they were their homes, and as such embodied a special place that they continue to remember fondly. In Meskhetian homes in Nasakirali, Ianeti, Akhaltsikhe, Abastumani, and Tsitelubani my hosts, while unwaveringly maintaining their Georgianess, proudly demonstrated furniture, food, and memories acquired from places and times that supposedly should

have lost their meaning and importance upon making a home in Georgia. Indeed, the entities that make home, both tangible and not, while diverse among my informants, all illuminate the journey undertaken thus far, and the potential paths yet to come in the establishment of their respective homes.

According to the stories offered by my informants, home is a process that continues to unfold in numerous ways; it is present in the interactions and relationships they have with each other and others, it permeates the discourse through which they frame their identity, and presents itself as a reflection of what they feel belongs and what they feel does not. As one respondent stated when asked how he felt about his children being taught Georgian Orthodoxy at school,

I am happy that my children are being taught these classes. Every time one learns the structures of a new religion they grow. Just the same every time one learns a new language they become a new person. Not a new person entirely, but they gain new perspectives – they are able to understand things differently. It is the same with having multiple homes. We never leave one completely. Pieces of it remain with us, and when we move we take these with us. These elements help us to remember where we came from, but also where we should go (Interview, August 2011)

At once, the connections between the past and future are drawn into the present construction of home. It is through this fusion of temporal realms that the Meskhetians of Georgia not only seek to reclaim their past and solidify their futures, but also ensure that they project the importance both have in constituting who they are.

“Here we are free,” one respondent stated. However, he went on to clarify that this freedom – along with his home in Georgia – is still a work in progress. “Of course,” he continued, “we need to be more free – more democratic, more integrated. No one should feel that they are on foreign soil here, whether they are from Canada, Georgia, or

anywhere else, because they too should have the right to come here. Anyone should be free to come and live here. This is the twenty first century, why are we living like it is the nineteenth” (Interview, August 2011)? He went on to state “my father built this house about fifteen or twenty years ago. I have been building another house for the past five years. It will probably take me another ten to finish it. It is important though, to finish it. It is important to be able to have guests in your home, it is important for socializing” (*ibid.*). According to him, having a home that offers comfort, and the comfort of having a home you enjoy, affects all aspects of one’s life. For him, the creation of home had a projected end date – however tenuous it may have been. Through his narrative he made clear that even after its physical structure would be completed, home would continue to be negotiated and renegotiated through the social interactions to which it will someday play host.

In its production and the manifold renegotiations of its existence, home becomes a multidimensional construct – one in which temporality intersects with spatiality and social relations in a complex series of conjunctures (Kabachnik et al. 2010, 317). As one respondent claimed “home is a place of association / intercommunication (*obshchenie*). It’s my life. Homeland then home; it is like a mother – home, and homeland, and that is it. It’s my protection. To me it does not matter if I have a good, large, or expensive home; provided that there is no war, provided that there is no hunger, I am home” (Interview, August 2011). At once home constitutes the past, present, and future; a spatial configuration found in both its tangible, physical and imaginary realms; and captures the protective and nurturing tendencies of a mother. For my informants the making of home entails a continuous process that is defined through quotidian encounters

and practices, and it is through such mediation that home can be found both within and outside of Samtskhe-Javakheti. As one respondent claimed “the old people want to go back to Akhaltsikhe (the present-day administrative capital of what used to constitute Meskheti), but young people absolutely do not. I do not want to go. Here, I live by Kutaisi, Kobuleti, Ajara, the Black Sea. I have my home here. Why would I want to move” (Interview, August 2011)? Another claimed “to say that everyone wants to come here is a lie, it is nothing more than propaganda. Sure some will come here, but others will choose different places to make their homes” (Interview, August 2011).

Home – through its multiplicity of spatial, temporal, and societal connotations – is difficult to clarify and label as a concept. These hindrances become more tedious as it is applied to the context of forced migration, potential return migration, and repatriation. Despite the temptation of policy makers and theorists to definitively state that the return of Meskhetians to Georgia marks the end of their exile, a return to normalcy, and a restoration of their proper home, the reality is more complex. Recognition of these complexities is paramount to the understanding of these truths. For Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia – and all others for that matter – there is no finality in home, it is a process that is lived. To suggest otherwise belies my informants’ experience. As one respondent markedly stressed,

Sure, we have come to Georgia, but we have not returned. How do we return to a place we have never been before? Of course, our ancestors are from here, but many of us who live here now, well this is the first time we have ever been to Georgia. All things the same, the Georgia that our ancestors lived in is not the Georgia of today. If we went from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’, return would mean going back to ‘A’. We however, have gone from ‘B’ to ‘C’. This is not a bad thing, but ‘C’ is very different from ‘A’. To say otherwise would not be honest. Thus, for me, we have not returned. For me, a better word would be returning (*vosvrashaemsa*). We are returning (Interview August 2011).

In other words, home is found in the complex intermeshing of the past, present, and future; the reality that place entails a complex and ever-changing locality affected by those who inhabit it and those who do not; and that 'return' does not necessarily equate finality, but rather manifold new processes and challenges. According to this narrative return has eluded the Meskhetians who have settled in Georgia – it betrays an acceptance that the journey to point 'A' will probably never be completed, though always sought after. Yet admittedly, this does not entail negativity or failure. It is the action of returning in and of itself that shapes the process of making home.

Going Back Home?

Conversely, the naturalization of the relationship between people and place is largely corroborated by its affirmation among many of my informants' views of where their proper home should exist. "This is our homeland. Whether it is hot, cold, rich, or poor, it is our home. Here is ours (*svoi*)" one respondent explained when she was asked why she decided to return to Georgia (Interview, August 2011). The notion of 'ours' helps rationalize the experiences they had encountered during their exile. When asked how his home in Georgia differed from those that he lived in earlier, he explained that there was a significant "difference between them (his home in Georgia and those he had inhabited in Azerbaijan and Kabardino-Balkaria). I see it all of the time. You understand the difference is in the land. This home that I live in here has its foundations in our native soil. My father's home was in foreign (*chuzhoi*) land" (Interview, August 2011). He went on to clarify,

Foreign soil is always... if you look at it, of course... we all talk about integration, ethnic differences, issues of tolerance, and these sorts of things, especially since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Understand that this is not news. There (in the polity of Soviet Union), absolutely, we were considered as a different nationality. This meant that each was the master of his or her own proper land. Of course this was not the case for us. Everyone else could say that this is my land. This is how it was in Uzbekistan, in Azerbaijan, in Kabardino-Balkaria, and in Russia; this is how it was everywhere (*ibid.*)

As Graham and Khosvari conclude, based on their study of Iranians in Sweden, “Many... find themselves in a situation where they must 'perform'... They occupy 'space' in Sweden in this way, but cannot inhabit it in a unselfconscious way; it is not a 'place' where they feel at home” (1997,120). My informants too discussed their former places of residence in terms of a space that they were unable to truly convert into a place that they could call home. The corollary of which is living in ‘foreign’ soil equates uncertainty and anxiety.

These sentiments of *svoi* and *chuzhoi* are rooted in Soviet legacies of appropriating rights and privileges to titular nationalities. Soviet nationalities policy was paramount in affording the notion of homeland its importance, as it recognized not only the limited autonomy of its Union Republics, but that of smaller, often territorially concentrated, ethnic minority groups that existed within them. This recognition afforded ethno-cultural, socio-economic, and political rights based on an intricate system of hierarchies established through a territorially administered system of nested autonomy. It is a legacy that clearly continues to shape and influence articulations of identity and feelings of home, and where one belongs, as my informants almost always shaped their narratives to fit such frameworks of inclusion and exclusion. It is also a legacy that my informants never directly experienced, as they were never afforded such autonomy. It is

from this paradigm that their vehement insistence on their Georgianess emanates – it should not be viewed as an affirmation of essentialized, sedentarist parlance, but as a realization that claims to ensure the security and sanctity of belonging, the ability to call Georgia home, must be made through such filters.

Employing the essentialist parlance of sedentarism, my informants justify their relationship with, and right to, the land in Georgia. Feelings of permanency become palpable and legitimized through such rhetoric, that at once promotes inclusiveness while maintaining exclusivity. “We consider ourselves Georgians – a portion of the Georgian nation. The very word *Sakartvelo* – Georgia in Georgian – nothing gives more meaning to this than that word” one respondent claimed (Interview, August 2011). For him, “*Sakartvelo* implies a collection of... Kartvelian Tribes – the peoples of Georgia; that is to say, Ajarans, Imerians, Svans, everyone that is considered Georgian. They are considered to be portions of the Georgian nation, and when we state that we are Meskhetian, we too consider ourselves a portion of the Georgian nation” (*ibid.*). This implies, as many pondered aloud, what would have been if they had not been deported by the Soviet authorities in 1944. Many of my informants wondered how, if they had remained in Georgia, they could be viewed as any different than Ajarans – who are accepted as ethnically Georgian, but also Muslim.

According to my informants the hostilities and uncertainties of ‘foreign’ soil are rectified through the reclamation of place in Georgia. One respondent confidently stated “...and this land here, no one can tell me that I am a foreigner – that I do not belong. This is my land” (Interview, July 2011). Another reflected “sure, it is not comfortable here, but I would not want to have my home anywhere else. Those who are here

understand this. They are here because they understand the importance of home – the importance of homeland” (Interview, August 2011). For my respondents resettling to Georgia constitutes a return to normalcy – a state of being that has evaded them since their deportation in 1944. “If we have a home, we can live normally. Not well, not poor, but normally” (Interview, August 2011).

The twentieth century has left Meskhetians with justifiable concerns regarding the ability to live normally – to ensure their security and stability, and the importance of the ability to call place one’s own in attaining such normality. As one woman stated “still, look at Kyrgyzstan! Last year there was the uprising, and again we were the victims (*zherty*)” (Interview, August 2011).³⁴ Indeed, it has been reported that in some villages in northern Kyrgyzstan, Meskhetians were the victims of violence, as the perpetrators were supposedly shouting “Go away... this is our land!” (quoted in Trilling 2010). As one Meskhetian victim from the Kyrgyz village of Maevka stated, after losing his home to arson during the violence, “we are not living here, we are just existing” (quoted in Trilling 2010). All of my informants noted that before coming to Georgia, their homes lacked any semblance of permanency – susceptible to the whims of possible hostile host populations, and existing in no more than protracted reprieve.

This acceptance that every group of people has a proper ascribed place that constitutes their proper home, a place to call their own, is a theme that ran throughout all of my informants’ stories. It was woven together with determinants and gradations of the perceived quality of life other places simply could not offer. It was often claimed that Meskhetians would not be able to thrive outside of their proper homeland in Georgia, and

³⁴ For more on the violence in Kyrgyzstan and its impact on Meskhetian residents see Trilling 2010

that even if material conditions could be seen as worse in Georgia, life was assuredly better.³⁵ When asked if she missed her home in Uzbekistan one informant replied,

No, because there (in Uzbekistan), when they deported us, we were in a shanty (*baraki*) settlement. They were old, long homes where we lived in one room, our neighbours in the next, and so on. Later, when we moved to Kyrgyzstan, my mother and father worked. Everyone worked. We were able to save money and buy a real home. It was bigger than this one. When we came to Georgia for the first time, my father had to buy a smaller home as that was all he could afford. All the same, this one is better. It gives me more comfort than the others (Interview, August 2011).

Another informant juxtaposed the conditions of Azerbaijan and Georgia in terms of health as he stated “in Azerbaijan, in general it was bad. There were infections. There was even, what do you call it? Malaria! Of course, we did not have it, but it was there. It’s not here. Here there is nothing of the sort. Georgia is so pure! God willing it will always be this way” (Interview, August 2011)! Reinforcing and further developing this narrative of the pureness and comfort of Georgia, one respondent claimed “*Rodina* is like a second mother. Georgia is my *rodina*. It is my mother. It is everything that is native. Everything that is native to you. It’s your home. Not necessarily this home, but everything in this sphere (*sfera*). That is my home. That is one’s *rodina*. But how do I explain this? How can anyone explain what *rodina* is” (Interview, August 2011)?

For many, both Meskhetians and actors in the international community who have promoted their (re)patriation, the act of coming to Georgia is perceived as the end of a long, gruelling journey. As one respondent claimed “before, they told us if we were not happy where we were, we could move. We could look for somewhere to live better. Now, we can’t search for a better life. Why? Because we have already reached this

³⁵ This is an idea visited in more detail in chapter 4.

point. The fact is that we had to return to this land. We must return to our home” (Interview, August 2011)! This finality, however, obfuscates a more complex understanding of the nuances that such a ‘return’ embodies. Moreover, as illustrated by the testimonies of my informants, the manifold challenges and processes that they have encountered since their journey to Georgia directly challenges the assumption that ‘return’ equates going home.

The fact that ‘return’ does not necessarily entail going back to homes that were left as a result of the deportation is reflected in the fact that, at the time of research for this project, no Meskhetian has been able to accomplish such a feat.³⁶ Moreover, only a small minority of those who have come to Georgia have managed to return to the same village that they or their ancestors once inhabited. It is clear then that ‘return’ does not necessarily automatically imply going home, or a restitution of normalcy.

Rather, it is a process, a journey – one that needs to be negotiated and constructed. “I liked the mandarins, the trees, the green. It looked like we ended up in Africa!” one respondent claimed when describing her first memories of her arrival in Georgia (Interview, August 2011). As her story continued though, the narrative of return became more complex, “we came to our homeland!” she asserted – but in the same breath stated “we came here with the hopes of going to Samtskhe-Javakheti, to the village of Abastumani where my father was born, but ended up in Guria” (*ibid.*). “Where did we come from? Where were you born? These were the questions that we asked when we were little” she continued, “you will see, you will see, we are going there now, my parents assured me. But they (the authorities) did not let us go there. They sent us here

³⁶ Given the temporal divide between the deportation and respective return of those Meskhetians who directly experienced it, their age, and the fact that so few remain alive, this is a statistic that will probably remain unchanged.

instead. Well, this is your homeland too, my father said. And, I am okay with that. It's beautiful here. So beautiful" (Interview, August 2011). In other words, home and homeland are indeed diverse journeys, the parameters of which, while perhaps articulated through group narratives, are ultimately negotiated and constructed at the individual level.

Another informant from Nasakirali echoed these same tensions regarding the difference – or lack thereof – between here and there, what constitutes home and what does not, stating "I really enjoyed my first impressions of Georgia. The nature, the beautiful region (Guria), and the people, I really liked everything about it. What did I enjoy the most? It was my homeland, and that's it! Of course, this is not Samtskhe-Javakheti, but still, this is where my home is. No one can say that this is not my homeland" (Interview, August 2011)! Another definitively stated "of course there is a difference between here and there. The climate, for one, and the peoples (*narodi*), there they were a different people. Here (Georgia) is better than there, we live better here" (Interview, August 2011).

For some, home was, and would be found in, Nasakirali as new houses were being built amid older ones; for others Iani would continue to be home given its strategic location and proximity to major centres and places of relaxation. Yet, the pronounced lack of spatial movement among my informants who relayed this information to me did not entail the end of their respective journeys. The journey of home, whether better travelled 'here' than elsewhere, does not come to an end upon 'returning' to Georgia, nor does it solidify places of settlement as permanent. Rather, it is a process that continues to change and unfold. The construction and negotiation of this journey,

whether measured through the tangibility of the material or the subjectivity of the conceptual, is not fully achieved by the act of 'return' alone. Home is something that is continually sought after. For the Meskhetians of Georgia, it is an entity grounded in the present, cognizant of the past, and hopeful for the future. It does not necessarily preclude spatial movement, but rather forged from it – even for those who maintain that they will permanently stay where they have settled.³⁷ For many it is a source of security and stability – one that needs to be claimed through the discourse of ethnic entitlement. Ultimately, however, home is a journey that needs to be planned, plotted, and travelled by individuals.

³⁷ This will be the focus of inquiry in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

MOVING ON: CONSOLIDATING IDENTITY AND PLACE THROUGH FURTHER PATHS OF MIGRATION

If return does not equate the end of linear or cyclical cycles of forced migration, it should also not be assumed to preclude the possibility of further movement – forced or voluntary. As the stories of many Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia illustrate, attempts to resettle were challenged at every turn. Further instances of forced migration were common, and most ventures at establishing permanency in Georgia were unsuccessful. Even for many who managed to successfully maintain their newfound settlement in Georgia, movement has not ceased. Their emplacement within the polity of Georgia, solidified through these paths of further migration, challenges linear and cyclical conceptions of involuntary movement and its restitution.

This chapter turns its gaze to the seasonal labour migration regime that many Meskhetians participate in as they travel to Eastern Anatolia, Turkey to find employment, most frequently in tea plantations. Yet to view the Meskhetians of Georgia who travel for employment as simply migrant labourers, I argue, belies the series of predicaments that shape and define their decisions to embark on such journeys. As Barrett notes, this label constricts our understanding of the existential components of those involved in such processes (2009). It omits recognizing them as members of an ethno-confessional minority community in a country that continues to define itself through reactionary, relatively illiberal ethno-cultural nationalism (Brown 2000); it fails to view my informants as providers for their respective, extended families; and moreover, it obscures

the fact that many are experienced ‘travellers’ who have participated in manifold instances of migration – Turkey merely being the most recent destination. Moreover, to reduce my informants to a singular vector of identity, that of migrant labourers, fails to highlight the numerous and shifting lines of division and inclusion that they encounter on their journeys, and the mechanisms that they employ to further emplace themselves within the polity of Georgia. Rather, as these voyages – and the interwoven practices and processes of integration, ethno-political identification, and the dispersal of economic and political power that they entail – become routine parts of the quotidian existence of many of my informants as they produce paths of migration that blur the lines between forced and voluntary movement (Jansen and Lofving 2009; Jeffery 2010). It is through these paths, embodying aspects of both voluntary and forced international migration, that many of my informants define themselves and solidify their bonds, both economically and conceptually, to the homes they call their own in Georgia.

In this chapter I employ an experiential perspective to capture these critical aspects that constitute the places forged through and on these frequently travelled paths (Barrett 2009). By clarifying these journeys as places in themselves, it allows for mobility to be regarded as an existential occurrence – the elucidation of its social dimensions. In doing so, this chapter aims to examine how these journeys affect Meskhetian identity articulation as they encounter their self-ascribed other on their travels to Turkey for seasonal labour migration. I argue that it is through these interactions that narratives of self, other, backwardness, and modernity are at once complicated and muddled but also simplified and hardened. As the stories my informants have shared convey, the numerous aspects of making home after ‘returning’ to their

perceived historical points of origin are only realized through further movement. These paths transcend pre-existing notions that spatial return embodies a return to normalcy and holistic preclusions to further trajectories of movement.³⁸

Pathways Between Perilous Places

The collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent disarray forced many to search for new livelihoods and conventions to forge everyday lives. As the new successor states emerged – supposedly ensuring protection and benefits for their respective majorities – many of both the titular majority and incumbent minority populations were forced to look beyond the confines of these newly established borders in their search for more stable livelihoods. Hitherto this was a rare occurrence, as during the Soviet period 95% of the Georgian population remained within their titular republic as patterns of migration almost always led to Tbilisi (Shinjiashvili 2005). However, this post-Soviet necessity of procuring livelihoods beyond traditional national borders has been acutely pronounced in Georgia since its independence. Between 1989 and 2002 976,000 people, approximately 24% of Georgia's population, have officially emigrated from the country (Rowland 2006). The reasons for this shift in trajectory from Tbilisi to beyond the republic's boundaries can largely be traced back to the economic uncertainty and violence that dominated Georgian society during its early independence. Today, the economic situation remains prevalent as a push factor encouraging emigration, both temporary and permanent. Moreover, given increasing economic tensions and rising levels of poverty in Georgia, especially in its rural areas, economic determinants of migration are even stronger now than during the chaotic early 1990s.

³⁸ For more on these pre-existing notions see: Koser and Black 1999; Black 2002

Meskhetians living in Georgia are also active participants in these processes. Indeed, many informants volunteered the information that either they or family members partook in both temporary and permanent migratory flows. After the tea plantation in Nasakirali and the collective farm in Ianeti closed in the early 1990s, those Meskhetians employed there were forced to seek alternatives – to which, at least locally, there were virtually none. Many spoke of the scarcity of opportunity that existed then in Georgia, which was only compounded by the fact that they were viewed as Turks during the ethnocentric, turbulent 1990s. These tribulations were often cited among my informants as the main reason for their travels to eastern Turkey.

Notions of difficult existences were not unprecedented for Meskhetians, even after returning to Soviet-era Georgia. As one respondent recalled, “well, comforts, there were no comforts here. We had a simple life, and did what we could with what we had” (Interview, August 2011). There were popular myths, however, among local Armenians and Georgians that Meskhetians did enjoy a certain amount of wealth not commonly possessed in the region. She went on to say that “school was difficult, there were no good teachers here. All of the good teachers, we were told, were in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, or Batumi. They (verbally) abused us (Meskhetian children). They would say, you were deported, you were deported because you had lots of gold. Where is this gold? Such nonsense. But, that was how it was back then” (*ibid.*).

Life in rural Georgia, if ‘ostensibly simple’ and stable under the Soviet Union, has become increasingly difficult and uncertain, as products, food, and sources of income have, as one respondent claimed, “completely disappeared” (Interview, August 2011). This scarcity and lack of opportunity, however, has pushed Meskhetians to pave new

avenues of integration with a Georgian population that largely still regards them as outsiders. As one respondent exclaimed “give me work! I would love to work! There is nothing though. Now, I am talking about all of Georgia, not just here. There is very little in this state. Life for Georgians is also very difficult now, not just for us” (Interview, August 2011). Though he mentioned that life is markedly difficult for both Georgians and ‘us’, betraying an implied level of separation between the two, many Meskhetians situate their current socio-economic situation in a discourse that couples them with their ethnic Georgian counterparts.

The narrative of historic homeland runs deep among Meskhetians, especially among those who presently reside in Georgia. Their affirmation of Georgia as not only their proper homeland, but also as a place of stability and security was unwavering throughout their stories. Even when discussing the manifold challenges that one encountered on a daily basis when living in rural Georgia they were always quick to highlight that despite its setbacks – always depicted as fleeting – life was good, and the future was promising.

However, in the search for securing more lucrative current sources of livelihood both ethnic Georgians and Meskhetians have turned their gaze to Turkey. Throughout the 1990s Turkey, along with Russia, were almost exclusively the destination points of those looking to find employment outside of Georgia (Shinjiashvili 2005). These have since been joined by countries further afield, mostly in western Europe, where more substantial incomes can be earned. However, many Georgians and virtually all of the Meskhetians who travel abroad for seasonal labour continue to look to eastern Turkey, securing occupations as labourers mostly in tea plantations.

The reasons for these continued paths of seasonal labour migration to Turkey are diverse. Most apparent is Turkey's geographic proximity. For many living in southwest Georgia the Turkish border is easily accessible by bus or communal car, though the trip can be expensive.³⁹ The second reason that many informants spoke of was the opportunity to do the work that they knew. As one respondent noted, "how many years I worked in that tea plantation! Tea is what I know. I still collect it here, though it is difficult to sell. Why would I not go where I could make more money" (Interview, August 2011)? The third oft-cited reason for the continual journeys to Turkey was the fact that immediately after the border opened networks of traders and commerce emerged, facilitating pathways in both directions. The path to work in Turkey was well established. I was told of these established networks, familiar faces, and known roads – ultimately it was that these pathways were familiar. "It is the people I travel with, the guys at the border who know us, even the Turks I work with. I feel comfortable with these people" (Interview, August 2011).

While many recounted hardships and obstacles stemming from the places that existed at the limits of their journey, Georgia and Turkey, the path itself was almost always spoke of in terms of admiration. The entangled and multifarious trajectories of those who travel these paths have coalesced around a narrative that, for my informants, depicts mobility along these routes as safe, secure, and familiar. The stories that my informants shared run counter to established, 'sedentary' meta-narratives that view movement as intrinsically violent and unnatural (Malkki 1995). Rather than merely constituting a path between two demarcated localities, these journeys became known places in and of themselves – constituting a series of complex trajectories of interactions

³⁹ One of my informants in Nasakirali owned such a vehicle.

between and amid those coming, those going, and those staying spatially still. According to my informants, the connections and relationships that are formed and forged along these paths are invaluable. As one stated “I do not necessarily like where I am going (Turkey), but I love the people I go with” (Interview, August 2011). Another mentioned how despite hardships at home and away, for him, “the journey (between home and away) – nothing bad could be said for the journey, it was peaceful ” (Interview, August 2011). Moreover, the sense of comfort and solace that many of my informants found on these journeys only became more noteworthy when juxtaposed with the relative insecurity, anxiety, fear, and violence that dictated their existence at their respective points of departure and destination.

“We Don’t Belong (T)here”

In light of the ethno-linguistic and confessional similarities that Meskhetians share with their Turkish counterparts, Turkey would appear to be a sensible and perhaps welcoming destination for seasonal labour. One would assume that if any problems were to exist they would probably be encountered at the state border – but given the benefits to be had both Turkey and Georgia encourage cross-border trade and flows of capital. Yet, despite, or perhaps because of, their similarities, my informants note problems not at the actual physical border regime of either state, but the sharp, rigid divides of alterity and exclusion that are present after entering Turkey. Pelkmans, in his research on the Georgian-Turkish border, states “though the borderline may be the most tangible point of division and contact, it is important to note that the various socio-cultural dimensions of the Georgian-Turkish border do not necessarily coincide with the literal borderline,” (2006, 14). This is a reality that my informants claim to encounter throughout the entirety

of their time in Turkey. Indeed, the narratives that my informants offer do not depict a singular physical line of separation. Rather, a multiplicity of frontiers and contact points exist. Through these lines of division – political, economic, and cultural – it is clear from their stories, that my informants are not welcomed as co-ethnics, as some academics claim they are (Aydingun 2007), but held at arm's length as outsiders.

Meskhethians crossing the Turkish border in search of seasonal labour encounter myriad vectors of alterity through labels that are ascribed to them by their Turkish counterparts, which also shape their own outlook and sense of self. Eastern Turkey, while having become, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a popular destination for seasonal labour from the Caucasus, remains largely ethnically homogenous. As Hann and Beller-Hann state in their study of Georgian traders in the Anatolian provinces of Artvin and Rize, “the ‘modernist fiction’ that is the Turkish nation-state, crucially buttressed by Islam, has triumphantly succeeded the diversity of the agrarian age, and is not yet seriously threatened by the new diversity of ‘post-modernist’ fragmentation” (1998, 237-238).

This homogeneity is attributed to the prowess of separation achieved by the rigidity and endurance of the Soviet-Turkish border – its legacy being one of stereotypes that continue to shape and influence perceptions of those beyond this territorial division. Though the establishment of the Soviet-Turkish border did not reflect any underlying social reality, this technique of organizing space, “could not help but become an important point of reference in response to which identities and distinctions were constructed and articulated” (Pelkmans 2006, 14). As Hann and Beller-Hann affirm, it was the very existence of this frontier, closed and heavily guarded, that confirmed images

of what the Soviet Union constituted – political repression and totalitarianism (1998). This view of the Soviet Union other among citizens of Turkey also instilled the notion that its peoples, willingly or not, possessed a sense of uniform singularity, and to distinguish one from another was useless.

As the border became more porous following the Soviet collapse, these stereotypes promoting rather than giving way to the intricate realities that the nuances of interaction surely highlighted, found new life and hitherto unrealized strength. The flux of cross-border movement, specifically seasonal labourers from Georgia, has also encouraged ardent efforts to define and solidify ideas of identity and difference between those who belong and those who do not. As Pelkmans notes, it is at junctures of interaction where the ambiguity of inclusion and exclusion is strongest that clarity is often most vehemently sought after (2006). These stereotypes, which largely went unchanged after the Soviet collapse, continue to have powerful resonance in establishing the lines of alterity – lines that are often presented as static and immutable. Hann and Beller-Hann note that “the great majority of residents in this part of Turkey, including hundreds of thousands of Georgian speakers, had little to no idea what was happening to the people of Georgia and other components of the Soviet Union” (1998, 245). Their perceptions of the Soviet Union were largely grounded in popular depictions of political repression and economic inefficiency coupled with individual characteristics of amorality. My informants’ stories present an important continuity of images before and after the Soviet collapse, symbolizing the spectre of difference and the hardened lines that is has coalesced around.

It is amid these struggles between clarity and ambiguity that my informants negotiate their identity as their own preconceptions of who they are clash and mix with external views. As one respondent stated “they (Georgians and those who claim Meskhetians are ethnically Turkish) say that we should be at home in Turkey. They say that we are Turks, and therefore we belong in Turkey. We should fit in with Uzbeks, as they are Turkic people too” (Interview, August 2011). Yet, my informants recounted a sense of rejection by their Turkish and Uzbek counterparts, and in doing so affirmed with certainty that their place was in Georgia. As my informant continued, “but in Uzbekistan and Turkey they tell us that we do not belong. You are Meskhetians they say, and we are! In Turkey they call us Soviets, Georgians, or Russians. They do not want us there. So where do we belong? It is clear that we belong here in Georgia” (*ibid.*). Though it is evident that this statement gives rise to similar sentiments of doubt and ambiguity.

For many of my informants the struggle to articulate their unique identity in relation to those who would also seek to shape it is framed through paradigms of backwardness and modernity, echoing vestiges of Soviet parlance. Stereotypes among inhabitants of Anatolia about those coming from the former Soviet space as being immoral and victims to the vices of alcohol, drugs, and sexual promiscuity (Hann and Beller-Hann 1998) are in turn used to bolster commonly held Meskhetian and Georgian images of Turkish society. Meskhetians hold that such statements belie a certain inherent backwardness among Turks. For my informants the fact that those in Turkey could not, or did not care to, differentiate between the labels of Soviet, Russian, or Georgian was nothing less than proof of the backward nature of Turkish society.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ This is interesting in that all of my informants always strived to be viewed as Georgians. They went to great lengths to downplay the ethno linguistic and confessional differences between them and their ethnic

Self-prescribed progress was a common theme among my respondents used to differentiate themselves from their Turkish counterparts and to build upon their ability to emplace themselves within the polity of Georgia. There was a common sentiment among my informants that Georgia, while still hindered by many problems, provided a far more progressive society than Turkey could offer. For my informants Turkey's backwardness went beyond mere intangible, societal differences and presented itself in the application of production techniques, quality of goods, and the amorality of values despite the conceded, contradicted, notion of piety present in Turkish society. Other evidence of Turkey's lack of progress and inherently backward nature often accompanied depictions of the quotidian processes that my informants undertook upon their voyages to eastern Anatolia.

All of my respondents from Nasakirali spoke of the lack of knowledge Turks possessed regarding tea harvesting, and the lack of quality it produced. "They do not know tea!" one respondent exclaimed in frustration as he tried to explain the difference in how his work was done in Turkey compared to how it used to be in Nasakirali (Interview, August 2011). Numerous informants voiced their disagreement with the value given to quantity over quality. "It is all about profits. They do not understand it like we did here in Georgia" one respondent recounted (Interview, August 2011). His neighbour also touched on the value appropriated to money above all else including the workers' well being as she mentioned "everyone goes to Turkey. Everyone there is... it is like slavery. It is slavery. One of our neighbours, an Ajaran worked there for five years. They did not give him a Kopeck" (Interview, August 2011). Many of my informants spoke of the unfair working conditions that befell them in Turkey. The work was hard –at times

unbearable. The pay was low – although more than they could hope to earn in Georgia I was assured time and again. Despite commonalities in language and faith, my informants spoke of manifold instances where ‘locals’ made them feel unwelcome and different. These were signs of a lack of progress. For, as my informants maintained, Georgia has many problems, but they are being resolved, and those that do exist pale in comparison to the backwardness of those that are found in Turkey.

Such accounts display the effort these informants exert to emplace themselves within Georgia. One respondent, recalling life immediately after returning from Azerbaijan to Georgia lamented that “our teacher would say, if you are Muslim you are not Georgians, you should go to Turkey. You are Turks. People still say this” (Interview, July 2011). This indeed remains a popular sentiment among both local Georgians and Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti. However, for Meskhetians who live in Georgia, these claims are completely unfounded as another respondent claimed “if you think our homeland is in Turkey, by all means please go there and see for yourself what it is like. They are not like us. They look at things traditionally – backwardly (*ostalno*)” (Interview, August 2011). Indeed, it is through confronting the other that mechanisms of emplacement are most successfully employed by Meskhetians.

For Meskhetians, the process of ascribing characteristics that defined the contours of what constituted a Turk is a practice just as much concerned with defining the other as it is with affirming their own identity – though the ability to control such societal impressions is at times beyond their capacity. During a discussion that highlighted the fact that Turks often incorrectly called Meskhetians, Soviets, or Russians another informant countered with “but, the same happens here (in Georgia) we are mislabelled.

People say (referring to us) the Turks are coming! The Turks! The Turks! What Turks? We are not Turks. Just go there (Turkey) and ask them” (Interview, August 2011). In establishing what being a Meskhetian and what being a Turk entails, and the boundaries between them, Meskhetians not only solidify their perceived differences with their Turkish counterparts, but also affirm their Georgianess – and thus, their rightful claim to Georgia as their place alongside fellow Georgians.

Regardless of how the Meskhetians are regarded in Turkey, their perceived mislabelling as Turks in Georgia is thought, among my informants, to have serious implications. As such my informants have to strike a delicate balance that at once denies the conceptions that many of their Georgian counterparts harbour towards them while also affirming the progressive, righteous disposition of the Georgian polity – and their own rightful place in it. The fact that many within the polity of Georgia are content with labelling Meskhetians simply as Turks, for my respondents, is not a sign of backwardness among Georgians, but rather rationalized as the result of political intrigue on the part of specific Soviet and Georgian elites to discourage a large-scale return of Meskhetians to Georgia (Interviews, July and August 2011).

However, this claim that Meskhetians are ethnically Turkish is one, I was frequently reminded by my informants, that must be contested vehemently. As one respondent stated when speaking of such, as he posits, incorrect labels: “to call us (Meskhetian) Turks, it’s harmful, it’s a danger. Where did this name come from? Historically, it does not exist” (Interview, August 2011). After a long silence he continued, “we are Muslim Georgians. There are millions of Muslim Georgians who live in Turkey. If you include the Lazi... around Trabzon there are millions more. There are

probably more of these Muslim Georgians in Turkey, than there are Georgians in Georgia” (*ibid.*)!⁴¹ Another informant, commenting on his journeys to Turkey for work, stated that “*Ahıska Türkleri*, Akhaltsikhe Turks, Meskhetian Turks... all of these are wrong. When others call us this and when we call ourselves this, it hurts us. We are not Turks. We should be called Meskhetians, or maybe Meskhetian Georgians, or maybe just Georgians. There is a large difference between us and the Turks” (Interview, August 2011).

For the Meskhetians of Georgia, their ethno-confessional and ethno-linguistic affinities with their Turkish counterparts were not symbolic of their Turkishness, but rather their hybridized Georgian disposition. When discussing these differences another informant strongly asserted that even in linguistics there was little to no connection with those living in Turkey, as he stated “we speak Ottoman (*Osmanskii*)... or rather Muslim (*musul'manskii*). We do not speak Turkish” (Interview, August 2011). While this articulation of language as something derived from political or confessional lines of division permeated numerous circles of my informants, many saw it as being inherently tied to culture. For many there was no denying that they embodied a number of cultural similarities with their Turkish counterparts. As one respondent noted, “Meskhetian is part Turkish, part Georgia – it is a mixture. We speak in this dialect at home, it is what we feel most comfortable using, and this mixture best depicts us. Although, we are Georgians of course” (Interview, August 2011)!

Evidently, the interactions that take place between Meskhetians and their Turkish hosts have both challenged and supported the narratives that my informants have been

⁴¹ Though the population of Georgian speaking Muslims in Turkey is numerous, these figures are highly exaggerated. It is more likely that they number in the hundreds of thousands as opposed to millions. For more on the Georgian population in eastern Anatolia see: Hann and Beller-Hann 1998.

influenced by, and continue to share and call their own. Ideas regarding the articulation of identity among Meskhetians presently living in Georgia are both complicated and simplified through these processes of continuing migration to eastern Anatolia. The condemnation and justification employed by Meskhetians to explain incorrect labelling by their Turkish and Georgian counterparts belies a more nuanced polemic of identity consolidation than many would like to admit. It is clear that there is tension and sentiments of distrust and unease not only as Meskhetians travel to Turkey, but also always present within the polity of Georgia as well. Travelling between the two locations, based on the accounts of my informants and what has been recorded in the secondary literature (Sumbadze 2007; Trier and Khanzhin 2007), should serve to elucidate a number of similarities between how Meskhetians are treated in both societies. In both Georgia and Turkey they are regarded as outsiders – often tolerated, but almost never seen as members who belong. Yet, it is through these paths and points of contact that Meskhetians seek to solidify where they belong and where they do not.

Making Home by Leaving

Through affirming their own modern disposition, ascribing inherent backwardness to Turkey, and championing the progress of Georgia, Meskhetians simultaneously differentiate themselves from Turks and situate themselves as equals among Georgians. The journeys that many Meskhetians undertake in order to secure a better livelihood in Georgia lead them to Turkey. The fact that more stable and better paying employment is found in Turkey and not Georgia complicates Meskhetian and Georgian narratives of Turkish backwardness and self-ascribed modernity. As Pelkmans notes, this discrepancy has been adopted and modified by Georgians in Ajara to fit

narratives of victimization and moral superiority (2006). Meskhetians too have employed such mechanisms to clarify why their proper and, eventual, prosperous place is found in Georgia. As one respondent noted “I know that Georgia has many problems, but we are Georgians! If we were Turks what would we be doing here (in Georgia)? If I lived there for even two years I would have more than enough money to live comfortably here. But, I would not feel comfortable there” (Interview, August 2011). Another added that “we are different, yes they may have more money, more comfortable lives, but they are not us. We think differently – we see things differently” (Interview, August 2011). Even those who had family members going to school in Turkey, or working in post-industrial, service positions – perhaps making life in Turkey more enjoyable – noted that they had no intentions to stay after their respective work or schooling was finished. For my informants and the family members, neighbours, and friends they cited in their stories, time spent in Turkey was a means to an end – to solidify their place in Georgia.

At a material level, for many Meskhetians, the physical construction of home in Georgia was, and continues to be, dependent on work in Turkey. As one Meskhetian noted, “most go to Turkey to collect tea, almost everyone except for me – although, this may change in the future. I do not know. My family needs to eat too” (Interview, August 2011). Turkey, throughout my informants’ narratives, is depicted as a place that, while rife with backwardness and negativity, remains essential to their economic survival. The home under construction that was highlighted in chapter three, I was told, would not be possible without frequent trips to Turkey. Its chief planner and labourer admitted that “it is strange, knowing that I have to travel to and work in Turkey in order to build a home, a future, here in Georgia” (Interview, August 2011). “This one room

alone,” my informant lamented while pointing to an almost finished room complete with a new door and window, “took weeks of wages to pay for” (*ibid.*). I was reminded that it would be years before the home would be completed, but that if not for my informant’s ability to secure work abroad it would never happen. Given such realities, some informants, if only fleetingly, admitted to considering what a permanent life beyond Georgia would entail – perhaps how much easier life could be.⁴²

Yet, for my informants, after such moments of doubt, no matter how bleak the outlook, Georgia always seemed to retain its saliency in their narratives as a place that was rightfully claimed, and sought after, through their trials and tribulations – one that was not to be given up. As such, and perhaps in response to the temptations of seeking easier livelihoods outside of Georgia, travelling to eastern Anatolia, interacting with Turks, and adhering to Turkish norms has only served to solidify the articulation of their Georgian identity. I was constantly reminded that “yes, we are Muslims, but we are also Georgians” (Interviews, July and August 2011).

For the Meskhetians of Georgia, these paths of seasonal labour migration acted as affirmation that buttressed such sentiments. Indeed, many noted that it was on these trips with Georgian counterparts that they felt their Georgianess permeate the strongest. One respondent stated that “people think that you have to be Christian if you are Georgian, but this is not true, just ask a Turk” (Interview, July 2011). “We are treated the same (as other Georgians) when we go to Turkey. Our experiences and impressions are almost exactly the same” one Meskhetian man noted (Interview, August 2011). Another added that when in Turkey, “to them (the Turks) we are all the same. We are all Georgian”

⁴² It should be noted that this was most frequent among those who had family members who moved from Krasnodar Krai to the United States.

(Interview, August 2011). One respondent who had gone on many such trips with Georgian and Ajaran neighbours stated that “to be Meskhetian is to be Georgian. I go to Ozurgeti (the administrative capital of the Guria region) and say that I am Meskhetian, and they know that I am Georgian. I see men that I have worked with in Turkey, and they know that I am Georgian – that I am the same” (Interview, August 2011). As he continued, he again highlighted the importance and implications that these perceptions had as he stated that “if we are not Georgians, then we are foreigners. If we are Georgians than this is ours. This is our homeland – our native soil, even if we have to leave it in order to keep it” (*ibid.*).

It is through these journeys that place – in this case, the perceived rightful homeland of Georgia – is secured both materially and conceptually. Myriad vectors of inclusion and exclusion are navigated and negotiated on such paths, and it is through these processes that visions of the future are brought into focus. The stories that my informants offered in relation to their time abroad as seasonal labourers in Turkey weave together narratives of backwardness, modernity, and progress displaying these themes often in contradictory terms. Paradoxically, their journeys to Turkey in search of procuring better economic livelihoods reified preconceptions of their Turkish counterparts as pious and backward while promoting Georgian society, which they self-assuredly represent as modern. When these narratives come under scrutiny scales of progress shift to morality. While many conceded that standards of living were probably better elsewhere – in Turkey, for example – I was frequently reminded that the quality of life that was possible in Georgia was largely unattainable anywhere else. Thus, for many it was during these journeys to Turkey that they felt that they truly belonged in Georgia.

Many of my informants who partook in such endeavours noted that it was during these voyages that they established the strongest of bonds with their Georgian counterparts, and all stated that it was through such paths of seasonal labour migration to Turkey that Georgia transcended its role as merely an ancestral homeland, becoming a viable option for the future as well.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of those Meskhetians who have forged paths toward their historic points of origin by settling in Georgia remain understudied. Yet their stories provide rich, diverse narratives from which one can explore the congruent, reciprocal processes of displacement and emplacement. The journeys that my informants underwent in order to reclaim Georgia as their rightful place subjected many of them to an environment that was largely unknown. The stories of my informants were ripe with the obstacles that needed to be overcome. Differences in language, residential settings, and value systems predicated on ethnic and confessional affiliations all had to be negotiated as my respondents attempted to settle in Georgia. Moreover, those who managed to successfully accomplish these initial hurdles found themselves amid a society struggling to define itself as it attempted to navigate the major societal, political, and economic changes brought about by the fall of the Soviet Union. Thus, the Meskhetians of Georgia, and the complexities of their stories, offer a unique opportunity to study the effects of such phenomena on our understandings of the concepts of place and movement and their complex interaction with one another.

One of the major arguments of this study is that regardless of its locality, place remains invaluable for the Meskhetians of Georgia. Place is a lived, complex, and messy entity that is produced through the dynamics of the relationships of those who inhabit it and those coming to, leaving from, and passing through it. Conceptually, movement does not exist solely between places, nor does place exist solely at the beginning and end points of movement. Rather, they are inherent aspects of one another. Even in Georgia,

where place, as a concept, has become rooted in fixity and hardened almost exclusively along national lines of alterity, movement permeates and becomes an integral part of the place of Georgia. Whether it entails those beaten paths to nearby markets that are part of everyday life or larger-scale international flows, movement comes to define the creation and sustainment of place. Moreover, despite the perceived limits of availability of place in Georgia that render outsiders' claims to it as tenuous at best, the Meskhetians, through motion and in stasis, are unwavering in their resolve to claim it and emplace themselves within Georgia. The conceptual pillars of detached, unbounded thinking seemingly give way as the stories presented by my informants defend and reify place as an invaluable element of their existence.

Through reconciling the, traditionally considered, mutually exclusive nature of place and movement, this thesis has blurred the lines between here and there, emplacement and displacement, and porosity and rigidity. While this project has touched on a number of important aspects of the lives of Meskhetians of Georgia, some major themes surfaced that have particular resonance for both the everyday lives of my informants and the theoretical implications of this study.

That which reverberated almost ubiquitously throughout the entirety of my informants' narratives was the interpretation of freedom and restriction. The most overt expressions of these aspects were present in discourses that compared and contrasted the noted differences that have occurred since the fall of the Soviet Union. There was no consensus as to what regime offered more freedom or which was responsible for more repression. Rather, these interpretations seemed to work in tandem, highlighting certain aspects and demeaning others.

Notions of freedom and restriction presented themselves through statements that fondly recalled the ostensibly simplistic and comforting past of the Soviet Union, and the freedoms of work, school, and movement that it offered. These better times were always contrasted with the harsh constraints of economic hardship and lack of choice that the recent past and continued present reportedly befell upon my informants. Conversely, my informants highlighted a discourse that juxtaposed the oppressive technologies and methods of the Soviet state with that of the noted freedom that accompanied its demise and the rise of the independent Republic of Georgia. My informants were free to work where they wanted, if they could find employment. They could choose which schools to send their children to, provided they could afford it. Borders that during the Soviet era were permanently closed to them were now open and ready to be traversed. My informants repeatedly noted that they were free to interact with whomever they wanted. I was reminded several times that if this was still the Soviet Union my informants would not have been allowed to talk with me openly, and I surely would not have been able to come in the first place.

Indeed, underlying many of these assertions was the implicit connection of freedom and restriction to movement and place. Here the lines between forced and voluntary migration and displacement and emplacement become more porous than impermeable. Neither movement nor being spatially static in place necessarily entails freedom or constraint. As the narratives of my Meskhetian informants portray, movement can be both liberating and confining. Likewise, being spatially still presents both opportunities to feel free and oppressed.

Violence and agency become pertinent to our understanding of these processes of migration, displacement, and emplacement. My informants, in highlighting their lack of agency in coping with and navigating the newfound challenges that confronted them in transitional Georgia, touch upon forces that compelled them to move against their will repeatedly. However, my informants were subjected to similar circumstances without changing places, as the environment of place itself shifted and became the source of their feelings of restriction in Nasakirali and Ianeti. In this sense it was their very inability to move that created a sense of confinement that many continue to struggle with.

Movement too evades a singular categorization as innately oppressive in the Meskhetian case. As demonstrated by my informants that continue to travel to Turkey for seasonal labour and those who have moved in one capacity or another within the confines of the state of Georgia, instances of movement can be liberating. These instances of movement are, for my informants, one of their sole sources of joy and hope for a better future.

The interactions between place and movement, displacement and emplacement, violence and agency can be analyzed on many different levels. This study only examined a fraction of the possible sources of fault lines that exist among conceptions of place and movement and how those Meskhetians who have settled in the Republic of Georgia experience it. It has, nevertheless, endeavoured to complicate the relationship between these conceptual entities of place and movement and those who seek to navigate processes of emplacement and displacement as they continue to exist both in and out of place.

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