

# ‘Where Is the Global City?’ Visual Narratives of London among East European Migrants

Ayona Datta

*[Paper first received, July 2010; in final form, April 2011]*

## Abstract

Based on research conducted with men arriving from eastern Europe in London after the expansion of the EU in 2004, this article examines how migrants’ narratives of the city construct a counter-discourse to a ‘global’ London. It is argued that the use of ‘visual narratives’—a combination of participant-directed photography and semi-structured interviews as a methodology—allows for the exploration of embodied and material aspects of everyday lives in the city, which destabilise traditional urban pictorial approaches to the city. Such narratives of participants’ embodied movements through London relocate the observer as the everyday mobile-subject; they highlight the connections between urban and transnational mobilities; and they present participants’ constructions of different kinds of affective spaces in the city where they begin to negotiate home, belonging and return.

## Introduction

I don’t want to picture you know Big Ben or London Eye. Its common you know everyone took it so why should I? Something interesting, something different. You don’t have to be like everyone else, yeah? We were trying to show our lives in London.

Mikolaj, a young Polish migrant from Lublin came to live and work in London just after the 2004 European Union expansion when eight central and east European

countries were given rights to work in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Coming into London without the relevant skills or language proficiency, Mikolaj and his brother worked as labourers in building sites during London’s construction boom in 2005–07. His photo of ‘life in London’ (Figure 1) is significant in this context because he constructs a different kind of city that is set away from its iconic buildings. For Mikolaj, the iconic city is ‘common’ and *blasé*. Instead, he narrates a

**Ayona Datta** is in the Department of Sociology, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK. E-mail: a.datta2@lse.ac.uk.



**Figure 1.** Mikolaj's photo of his housemate in east London.

more affective relationship with a city whose spaces are shared with family and friends, and which makes the iconic city irrelevant to his everyday life. Crucially, his narrative is highly visual, articulated through photographs of different kinds of spaces and buildings, in which he is often present. Mikolaj therefore provides a visual critique of London that is highly personal and subjective, and in doing so he retrieves a sense of agency to construct and experience the city on his own terms.

Visual narratives in this paper refer to the simultaneous textual and pictorial narrating of migrant experiences of everyday life in the city. They are provided by migrants like Mikolaj and suggest a complex picture—that while migrants like him are relatively more engaged and in control of their own mobility (than those who are

forced or coerced to move across transnational spaces), their decisions to move nevertheless do not always materialise in terms of expectations and intentions. Yet even in the disjunctions between expectations and experiences, migrants like Mikolaj are able to take affective charge of certain aspects of their everyday mobilities in the global city. In so doing, visual narratives diverge greatly from conventional urban pictorial and documentary approaches to the city that often situate the observer as static and distanced from the migrant subject. In relocating the observer as the mobile migrant in these photographs, visual narratives then indicate the assembling of a migrant self through the multiplicities of everyday urban life.

In this paper, I take visual narratives as the analytical starting-point for research on migrants' mobilities and experiences of the global city. This has several dimensions. First, in presenting highly subjective participant photographs, visual narratives critique earlier urban pictorial traditions that produce disembodied and aestheticised subjects for the observer gaze. Secondly, through a relationship between pictorial and textual, visual narratives convey ways of inhabiting particular places by migrant bodies, of coming to and moving through/from urban spaces and of the destabilising of categories of near/far, home/abroad through these movements. Thirdly, while migrant photographs are located in urban spaces, as part of visual narratives they also relate to experiences on a national, political scale (Burrell, 2008), represent locality dynamics, or even materialities of migration, such as stories of significant objects and material culture (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). This multiple positionality is important, since it suggests the competence and desire among migrants to contribute to and be involved in urban life in ways that are not just to do with survival in a new context.

## Visualising the City

There has always been a strong pictorial tradition of visualising the city—as part of professional knowledge, as an aesthetic product (whether heritage or touristic) and as documentary knowledge. As professional knowledge, the pictorial tradition attempts to map an ‘objective’ version of social reality with the explicit purpose of proposing policy or design interventions to the ‘problems’ of urban spaces. Aesthetic and documentary visualisations of the city, on the other hand, have focused on museumified visions of urban spaces (Crang, 1996) that valorise urban landscapes. Crucially in these urban pictorial traditions, the observer-photographer is removed (both socially and physically) from the frame. This approach tends to produce a view of the city that is voyeuristic, disembodied and distanced.

It is now widely accepted that photographs are highly subjective accounts of space and place as they

reveal something about the world and the people and places in it, and all the meanings and associations we conjure up (Haywood, 1990, p. 25).

Indeed, as Hirsch (1981) notes, photographs are aesthetic, social and moral products constructed by those who take them. Like text, photos too are ways of constructing social reality albeit in very visual ways and they get their meanings from the cultural, social historical and political contexts in which they are made (Becker, 1995). Crang (1996) notes that even photographs that attempt to capture ‘reality’ and present ‘objective’ knowledge cannot be seen as naive documents; rather, they require knowledge from the observer to ascribe meanings to them. Different urban pictorial traditions therefore should be seen to set up relations between different ways of

seeing in ways that construct different visual discourses of the city (Crang, 1996).

In this paper, I am particularly mindful of the need to develop more locally and materially grounded understandings of the migrant urban experience that move away from earlier urban pictorial traditions. I draw therefore from Latham (2003) who has recently argued that a cosmopolitan urban culture made through places such as bars, cafés and restaurants and performed by some of its urban citizens can be studied effectively through urban photo-diaries and photo-interviews of such actors. Latham’s approach attempts to understand the ‘cultural turn’ in urban geography which he notes has to be examined through new methodological insights beyond ‘canonical’ ethnography. Such methodological concerns are echoed by Farrar who notes that it is important for photography

to produce narratives which normalize, rather than racialise; which lower, rather than raise, boundaries between humans (Farrar, 2005).

While Farrar does not use participant photography in the same way as I do in this paper, his point remains relevant in the context of migrants’ visual narratives, which attempt to move away from the fetishisation of a global city to a construction of an ordinary city.

Participant-directed photography is not a novel concept. It has been referred to in its various forms as ‘autophotography’ (Dodman, 2003; Emmison and Smith, 2000; Thomas, 2007)—a visual equivalent to an autobiography; ‘photo elicitation’ (Harper, 2002); and ‘photo documentation’ (Markwell, 2000). As part of visual narratives, however, participant photographs look at migrants’ everyday lives in London on their own terms rather than those of the researcher. This allows participants to engage actively with the research process by

“telling their own stories” (Markwell, 2000, p. 92) of the city through their photographs. These stories are of the ordinary city, of ordinary spatial practices and events occurring in the city that are significant to them. This power (albeit partial) in directing the research process allows participants who are often marginalised in other spheres of society, “to take possession of the spaces in which they are insecure” (Sontag, 1973, p. 9) and in which their location is often overlooked. These are places where everyday lives materialise—the homes, buildings, shops and urban neighbourhoods. These are also connected to other real and imagined spaces of mobility which present multiple ways of seeing, experiencing and negotiating urban landscapes. Produced by the mobile migrant, these visual narratives then give us a highly subjective and embodied optics of understanding and imagining the city as a transnational space.

Thus participant-directed photographs depart from visual documentary traditions of representing the city through a different optics of affect, emplacement and critique in transnational urban spaces. First, researchers do not work with ‘found’ images (Rose, 2007), nor do they produce their own images (Pink, 2007). Visual narratives of participants displace ‘authentic’ representations of the global city circulated through ‘public’ photography (which includes professional, journalistic, touristic or artistic endeavours) and present an ordinary everyday city negotiated by migrants. In doing so, they destabilise the gaze of the disembodied and distanced observer and replace it with that of the mobile migrant-subject. Secondly, they bring into ‘view’ those absent spaces and places of everyday lives of participants prompting discussions of more private and affective spaces of the city, where participants take charge of their experiences of home and migration. Finally, visual narratives allow participants

to question the ‘taken for granted’ aspects of everyday urban life and become reflexive about the processes through which embodied experiences of urban mobility are produced. In doing so, they connect the experiences of moving across transnational urban spaces, to the practices of moving through, seeing and picturing everyday urban spaces.

## Mobility and Embodiment in Visual Narratives

Cities are full of mobile subjects—urban dwellers continuously on the move between different spaces of the city, between public and private, between home, work, leisure and retail. In the case of migrants, these moves are both transnational and translocal (Brickell and Datta, 2011). They are always negotiated through embodied and corporeal relationships with real places separated across geographical distances and through material experiences in particular urban settings. Thus it is not just migrants’ social or economic relations with the wider city; rather the city itself becomes

a fractured collection of mundane spaces and places that produces connections (both social and material) with other spaces, places and locales within and beyond the city (Brickell and Datta, 2011, p. 17).

Yet images of everyday life in the city often position the migrant subject as static (Crang, 2002). We see aerial shots of migrants in the city living in shantytowns, made iconic in films like *Slumdog Millionaire*, and voyeuristic and disembodied observations of everyday urban life in films like *Wings of Desire*. Critiques of such representations have been made by a number of feminist researchers (Beimann, 2004; Kindon, 2003). Beimann (2004), for

instance, critiques the production of knowledge from visual data that produce distanced and disembodied understandings of women's lives. She employs particular aesthetic strategies in her own videos to map women's multiple subject positionalities by juxtaposing satellite images of distant places with those of women on ground. While these "reorganise and visually recode the space in which we write femininity" (Beimann, 2004, p. 71), Beimann nevertheless remains the cultural and artistic producer of these images, her primary strategy being aesthetic rather than collaborative.

How then can images of everyday urban life relate to the mobile observer and how can they depict mobile subjectivity? Crang (2002) suggests a process of 'proprioception' in which observation occurs on the same ontological plane as images, as a normal run of things, which makes a clearer way of looking at the mobile and involved observer. This can be observed to a certain extent in Kindon's (2003) use of participatory videos, which pay greater attention to the practices of 'looking alongside' rather than 'looking at' participants' lives. Her videos make participants aware of the socially constructed nature of audio-visual material and encourage them to make choices about how they wish to represent themselves. More crucially, Kindon destabilises the distanced and disembodied researcher gaze by repositioning their bodies within the frame of the videos, thus highlighting the corporeal aspects of researcher-subject relationships. Such innovative uses of visual data enable multiple and partial ways of looking and, as Kindon claims, provide new possibilities for the production of knowledge.

In my research, such 'new' methodological approaches are important because they enable a shift in the disembodied gaze of the ethnographer to participants' everyday mobilities in the city on their own terms. I

do not suggest that participants' photographs are 'democratic' in depicting migrant urban life. Rather, my approach in this paper is that they do not make claims to any single reality in migrants' lives. Instead, they provide "spaces of vision and observation" (Crang, 1997, p. 368) that can only be interpreted through the researcher-participant relationship. Further, they help to overcome linguistic and often cultural boundaries through pictorial representations. In embodying the mobile-migrant and the reflexive photographer as one and the same person, these photographs work as interview 'triggers' to stimulate discussion and reflection on the affective geographies in the city and of their mobilities. This becomes particularly significant when participants carry their cameras not only across urban settings in London but also across national territories in ways that connect urban mobilities to transnational migration, as we shall see in this paper.

In this way, these photos act as

prompts and personal mnemonics as well as powerful ways of capturing and conveying information in an accessible, economical and nonverbal way (Sweetman, 2009, p. 502).

This approach then is not engaged with theories of visibility, rather with participants' emplaced mobilities across urban and transnational spaces, and the addressing of wider questions generated around movement and migration in the global city.

Thus, instead of aestheticised images, what we get are a set of photographs that are striking in their depiction of 'unspectacular' and often banal migrant lives in the city. They therefore present us with a different visual optics through which to understand and conceptualise transnational urban spaces, because they embody and embed participants' mobilities in spaces which they can often find hard to describe



in words. In shifting the focus of these photographs from aesthetics to ordinariness, visual narratives therefore open up questions around migrants' embodied use of urban spaces during migration and mobility.

## Photographing Everyday Life in London

London has long been a destination for migrants from across the world. The impact of an increasingly flexible global labour market in London in recent years has seen a rise in migrants from across the world. This has made London one of the most diverse cities in the United Kingdom. In the 2001 census, London showed evidence of its intense history of migration from all parts of the world, with ethnic minority groups making up 29 per cent of its population (CRE, 2007). This figure increased to 40 per cent when White ethnic minorities were taken into account. The most recent impact of migration into London, however, has been the accession of eight east European states to the European Union (EU) in May 2004. Labelled as the A8 countries, migrants from these states were required to register their employment details with the Workers' Registration Scheme (WRS) run by the Home Office in the UK in order to live and work here. Since then, 630 000 individuals have registered with the WRS (Home Office, 2009) of whom nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) are from Poland. These migrants are primarily male (58 per cent), young (82 per cent between 18 and 34 years) and without dependants (93 per cent) in the UK (Home Office, 2009). London now has the second-largest concentration (15 per cent, 51 750) of WRS registered workers in the UK (Home Office, 2009).

The presence of A8 workers in London had transformed the physical and social

landscapes of the city during 2006–07 when this research was undertaken. A total of 29 260 workers registered with the WRS now work in the skilled and unskilled manual trades in construction (Home Office, 2009), a high percentage of whom are Polish. A large number are also illegally employed in the building sector. Given the temporary nature of construction work and difficulties in accessing the housing market, these migrants are highly mobile in their housing arrangements, continuously moving in order to be close to their workplaces—the temporary building sites that also kept moving across London.

The visual narratives, as I call them in this article, are part of a wider project entitled 'Home, migration and the city'. I interviewed around 24 participants (one Bulgarian, two Romanians, one Ukrainian, one Latvian, and the rest Polish) just after the expansion of the European Union in 2004 when they arrived in London. The participants in this study were mostly single men in the UK between 24 and 47 years of age, arriving during 1996–2006. Those who had arrived before 2004 had until then largely worked illegally—once they gained legal rights to work in 2004, they returned to their countries and entered the UK legally as EU migrant workers. They were all working for small-time building contractors on home refurbishment projects in London. The participants were contacted through snowballing and, after an initial information-gathering interview, were given a disposable camera to carry around with them for a month before they returned this. Participants were informed about the focus of the research in the first interview, but the brief for taking photos was purposely left very open as "pictures of any aspect of living in London that they wanted to talk about". Once the photographs were developed, we met again; this time, however, it was a more in-depth

interview that was structured loosely around the issues and experiences that participants had captured in their photos.

The interviews were conducted after work or at weekends, sometimes in participants' houses, in the Polish community centre, cafés or pubs. Most of these interviews were conducted in English, apart from a few of the newly arrived Polish migrants when this was done with the help of a Polish interpreter. The second interview brought wider issues to the fore and led to a greater reflexivity using photographs as visual prompts. The participants had not just taken photos, but they were also reflecting upon the context, politics and meanings of the spaces portrayed in these photos. In that sense, these photos became auto-interpretative of their multiple positionalities in urban spaces.

This paper then focuses on participants' photographs 'on the move'. By that, I mean that the photographs are taken during participants' daily routines of moving through the city to reach work, home or leisure; but they also suggest a form of wider 'move' of participants across national and regional boundaries. This can be seen in three aspects of this paper—first, in looking at how the disillusionment of migration is produced from particular physical landscapes of the earlier 'desired' city; secondly, in constructing a city from this disillusionment as a place of ordinary everyday life; and, thirdly, in 'moving on' from the city in order to facilitate a return to the homeland.

### **'Where Is the Global City?'**

London's position as a global city has always been of particular importance in the social and cultural subjectivities of participants and it has shaped how participants made sense of their mobilities in London. During the socialist regime in their home countries,

restrictions of access and control over their movements into the 'West' had shaped how London had been imagined. Until the fall of communism in 1989, most participants had never travelled to the 'West'. A few older participants had travelled within the Soviet bloc as tourists, but for them these countries had been part of a similar political system. In this context, London for many years had been the cultural symbol of the 'West', as a city at the heart of English 'culture' which had been largely forbidden during the socialist regime.

Before the EU expansion in 2004, then, participants' routes into London had been fraught with difficulties since they were often denied entry when they arrived at the UK ports. However, since they had become part of the EU, the 'West' had at last opened up to them. London was now the financial capital of the world—participants would hear from others who had gone before them to London about the increased availability of jobs, high salaries and the general boom in its economy which would make way for individual 'success'. Coming to London, therefore, was to become a part of London's past as the symbol of the 'West' and part of its present as a global city.

This imagined construction of London became the yardstick against which all real-life experiences were compared and made sense of. And this comparison first arose during their route into the global city as seen in the series of photos taken by Andrej (see Figure 2). His journey from Poland to the UK was by coach across Europe and finally by ferry across the English Channel from Calais to Dover. This is also the route he took when visiting his family during holidays when these photos were taken. They capture Andrej's mobilities across transnational spaces in order to access the 'global city'. They highlight his mobility between home and abroad, which allowed him to confront, in the interview setting,



**Figure 2.** Series of photos taken by Andrej showing his journey to London across the English Channel.

the expectations that were embedded in this route when he made the journey into London for the first time.

What came to my mind is that ... a city that lost its integrity. It's not a typically English city but a city which is multi, multi, cultural. That's how I understand that. That's how I try to explain it to myself. And so, walking along a street in this city, you meet not only people, for example, only Englishmen or, but many nationalities ... It was strange for me. I couldn't get used to it for some time.

I have written elsewhere how such notions of 'strangeness' in a global city were a recurrent theme in most participants' discussions of their first encounters with London (Datta, 2009). I noted that these encounters with 'others' in London produced particular types of 'situated cosmopolitanisms' among

my participants. It was their access to social and cultural capital in different spaces (public and private) in London which determined their attitudes towards 'otherness' in the city. While a detailed discussion of exclusion and otherness in the city is outside the scope of this paper, these attitudes towards otherness were pronounced because of the geographical proximity to deprived neighbourhoods in London which also housed a large number of ethnic non-White migrants.

The next photo I wanted to talk about ... and present to you, are, actually this photo. These sights are, in east London actually, very common. And it is something that bothers me here, turns me against London. And I spoke with my friends who come to London, they imagined London differently, and it is different, like, you know, they land





**Figure 3.** Benedykt's photo of rubbish outside an east London house.

in Stansted, they come to, say, Ilford or to some sort of eastern area, and you know, something gets them.

Benedykt's photo (Figure 3) is taken to discuss the 'dirt' and 'filth' of a city which confronts those traversing a particular route into the city. His photo is produced from the dynamics of past experiences of socialism which framed a modern city in the 'West'. The photo of rubbish in an east London house speaks to this dynamic, because it portrays an antipode of the Western city—one that was expected to be sanitised and extraordinary, but that disappoints with its 'filth'. 'Where is the global city?', therefore, was a rhetorical question symbolic of both their journey into the heart of the 'West' and their search for an imagined iconic city.

Benedykt further highlights how their disillusionment was compounded by the landscape of their route into the city which was often via land and sea like Andrej or via low-cost airlines into London's outlying airports like Stansted and Luton. It is at the same time geographical in terms of migrant roots (since migrants from Asia or Africa would come through Heathrow airport) and social in terms of their class and ethno-national subjectivities. As Benedykt points out, this route of entry into London is an



**Figure 4.** Mikolaj's photo of a train station in east London.

important part of this disillusionment—it took them through London's suburbs straight into the heart of east London, a place with a high number of ethnic minorities. It bypassed the 'extraordinary' London with its historical monuments and iconic buildings and produced the first embodied confrontation with the 'global city' through its peripheral neighbourhoods.

*Mikolaj:* Looks like in Poland. Look like, looks like in Poland. The same like a village station somewhere in Poland. Like regular station in Poland.

*Interviewer:* But it's not Poland.

*Mikolaj:* No no, it's London. I never supposed to see that when I came to London. I hoped to see large buildings, everything clean and super but typical, usual, nothing special.

Mikolaj's picture of the train station (Figure 4) was taken when he was commuting to work in the city centre—this station was his everyday route into the city, a place which also reminded him of a 'village station' in Poland, rather than what he had expected. Mikolaj had come to London from Lublin, a small town compared with London or even with other Polish cities. He expected therefore to see physically larger spaces and buildings; he thought London would be



**Figure 5.** Mikolaj's series of photos during a night out in Piccadilly Square.

grander and spectacular. Yet he, like other participants, also came into London via low-cost airlines that took him into east London. Living in east London reminded him of similarities rather than differences with Lublin; it produced a city that was 'nothing special'. The London of his imagination had been 'clean and super', but the everyday London of his experience was 'typical, usual'—an ordinary city, where he led an ordinary life.

Significant in this construction of the ordinary city were also those iconic spaces and buildings of London which were seen as disappointing.

*Interviewer:* Do these remind you of any other place?

*Mikolaj:* Yeah, like New York or something [laughs] no. Yeah but I expected it to be bigger or something.

*Interviewer:* Why did you expect it to be bigger?

*Mikolaj:* Because it's London, when you told people from Poland that you were in London they go, 'Wow! Really? You were in London? How is it?'. But you would expect something bigger, something larger, something that's extra, yeah but it's nothing special really. You can get used to it. When you have works [*sic*] you don't really care about these things, don't care about commercials or something, I know because I work five days, yeah [laughs].

Mikolaj here takes a series of photos of different places in central London on a night-out with his friends (Figure 5). Most of these are easily recognisable: they are in and around London's West End, places which capture the tourist gaze. Yet Mikolaj refers to them as ordinary and disappointing because he had expected these to provide him with an experience of a spectacular city. It is here, in the size of these buildings, that the disjuncture between the imagined iconic



**Figure 6.** Benedykt's photo of Polish shops. He captioned this photo 'Welcome to Poland'.

city and the real embodied city begins to creep in. This disappointment is also related to the wider marginalisation experienced by migrants like him who came without relevant skills and worked in the lowest labour hierarchies in the construction sector and lived in temporary accommodation (Datta, 2011). In this context, the visual narratives presented here take on a different kind of significance. They suggest that participants' imagined global city is not just disappointing on arrival, but it is also socially distant and hence irrelevant to their everyday lives. This does not mean that the global city is unimportant; rather, these visual narratives reflect their sense of separation and alienation from this global city.

Crucially, in this series of photos, Mikolaj includes one of himself with his friends where they are drinking while waiting for the bus. Mikolaj reflects upon this as 'embarrassing' since he feels that it reinforces the stereotype of the binge-drinking Polish migrant in the West. Thus his visual narratives not only situate his disenchantment during transnational mobility, but also provide scope to reflect upon how his location within urban settings might evoke representations of ethno-national subjectivities.

In capturing the mobile migrant within the frame of these photographs, Mikolaj therefore destabilises the traditional divides

between observer and subject in much of urban photography and suggests how the observer, subject and image might relate to each other. Here, Mikolaj works as the observer in two distinctly different ways: first, as the everyday mobile observer-subject who has a corporeal experience of these urban places while he moves through them; and, secondly, when he reflects upon these photographs with the researcher in an interview setting. The mobility embedded in his observation and the "conceptualisation of the observer as among images rather than apart from them" (Crang, 2002, p. 21) in ordinary urban settings provide a different optics of understanding migrant subjectivity and 'otherness' in the city. They refer to disillusionment with their urban dreams, dilemmas of migration and the difficulties of leading a life beyond everyday survival in the global city.

### 'Welcome to Poland'

I began this paper with the photo taken by Mikolaj to situate visual narratives as a theoretical and methodological approach that challenges the notion of an iconic and global city. The discussion so far constructs a city that disappoints in its global credentials and is therefore largely irrelevant to migrants' everyday lives. Yet, as these visual narratives produce a sense of alienation from the global city, they simultaneously produce a heightened sense of locatedness and belonging within particular urban neighbourhoods (Datta, 2011). In this next set of visual narratives, participants reflect a "positive reterritorialisation where culture and social relations are recuperated and refigured, rather than lost" (McKay, 2006, p. 275).

And this photo [Figure 6] show [sic] the development of the Polish shops in London.



**Figure 7.** Tadeusz's photo of a car boot sale in London.

So I am looking from the perspective of time, I am going back say six years, when getting a Polish product bordered on the miraculous, and now there is plenty of it everywhere. This is the one thing that makes me happy.

Rabikowska and Burrell (2009) note how the recent emergence of Polish shops selling Polish food has produced a notion of home among many of the migrants who arrived after 2004. They argue that, while Polish products were available earlier, these were largely geared towards middle-class interests in health foods and were more expensive. The new Polish shops which sell these products at affordable prices produce

a feeling of belonging, recreate a feeling of home, empower its customers as citizens and mark ownership of territory (Rabikowska and Burrell, 2009, p. 219).

These Polish shops, recently established across east London, remind and connect Benedykt to everyday practices around Polish food which he was used to from living in Torun. This constructed for him a sense of belonging to particular neighbourhoods in east London where such shops were more abundant. Hence, when he recently moved home, he decided to live in east London so that he could be near these particular places

which connected him to familiar sights, tastes and smells from his past.

What is striking here and what comes across in many visual narratives is what Ley describes as

the continued relevance of the geographical building blocks of separation and difference in a putative world of growing proximity and sameness (Ley, 2004, p. 162).

The temporality of these processes in everyday life is captured in the spaces and places of the visual narratives. The localities and neighbourhoods in London are continually changing, developing, transforming, as new and different migrants move into them and make a living in London. Benedykt's visual narrative speaks of this continual transformation of London's urban spaces and places during the migration of east Europeans. In their transformation, they begin to provide continuity to migrants' transnational lives across different cities in their home and host countries.

Images then afford opportunities for

attending to everyday ecologies of materials and things; for thinking through the rhythms of urban environments; and for producing affective archives (Latham and McCormack, 2009, p. 252).

As builders, participants' affective geographies were as much about traversing home and work as about transforming the material geographies of home, migration, settlement and return. The construction of future homes in their homelands was seen by many participants as a way of performing their gendered roles, in sustaining the traditional Polish home and family through building (Datta, 2008). Yet this return was facilitated not necessarily through an alienation from London, but rather through a detailed knowledge of London's urban



neighbourhoods in ways that could be harvested towards a productive material return.

You know car boot sale? Yeah. I'm mad about car boot sale. I like very much. In 1989 when I started to go first time there, once mostly Sundays, I visited three of them—in Leytonstone, another in Shepherds Bush and another in Hounslow. And now, last two weeks ago I was in Basildon. Huge one, if you want to find something interesting, even pictures. I'm a fan of eh embroidery. I used to do. I'm fan of books. I'm buying books for my boy, for myself and sometimes small eh oil paints from like £1.50 or so and now because I started to build a house in Poland I need some equipment for house, mostly decorations for walls. In the time of four years, I have four big suitcases in Poland of these goods.

Tadeusz was in fact building his home during short trips to Poland on land gifted to him by his mother-in-law. This home had to be furnished, and Tadeusz collected these from car boot sales across London's neighbourhoods (see Figure 7). For Tadeusz, then, the photo captured his aspirations that would connect his past to the future. This was even more significant since, as Tadeusz claimed, antiques and historical objects that he could find in England were not available in Poland because their occupation by German forces had destroyed most of their historical goods.

Tadeusz's photo makes his movements across different neighbourhoods of London significant as a way of constructing a different kind of visual narrative of his future home—it captures the intent of displaying English historical objects in a Polish home to tell a personal story of migration and social mobility in his homeland. And his visualisation of the city through highly localised ties in order to facilitate return is starkly different from the aesthetic approaches of

Beimann (2004) who deliberately flags distant ties between places in her videos. Tadeusz's picture is not concerned with aestheticisation or critique; rather, his sole intent is to show to the researcher those spaces and places related to his transnational, urban and social mobilities. These are the places that matter most to him.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I show how visual narratives can provide both methodologically and theoretically distinctive ways to understand migrants' lives in the city. As a combination of participant photographs and narrative reflection over these photographs, visual narratives challenge urban pictorial traditions in a number of ways. First, they shift the gaze of the voyeuristic and disembodied observer to that of an observer-subject, manifested in the body of the migrant often framed in these photos. Secondly, they connect the migrant-subject to transnational and urban spaces through their multiple mobilities embedded in and reflected upon in the photos. Finally, visual narratives make a shift from aesthetic or documentary approaches to representing the global city. Instead, participants' emplacement in and observation of banal and ordinary places in the city and *en route* to their homeland, suggest an assemblage of a mobile migrant-subject within everyday urban spaces.

One of these assemblages relates to the sense of disillusionment with the global city. The disenchantment participants express through their photographs reflects the disjunctures between the imagined city and the everyday city. This disjuncture I have argued is related to the roots of their construction of the global city as the seat of modernity and Westernisation juxtaposed against the routes that take them into the city's deprived neighbourhoods and the



routes that they traverse everyday between home and work. Yet, while the global and iconic city remains largely irrelevant to their lives, participants are able to find within London's rapidly changing neighbourhoods a sense of 'homeliness' and possible routes of return to homeland.

One of the key assemblages of the mobile-migrant then is from the ways that visual narratives induce discussions of movement, settlement and return. Participant photos provide a visual frame for migrants to reflect upon their personal journeys to and from their homeland and link these to their personal histories and future aspirations. And in doing so, the visual narratives become a way for participants to become self-reflexive of the meanings and consequences of their own movements. Such reflexivity, I argue, allows researchers to pay attention to the highly subjective and temporal forms of migrant mobilities in everyday urban life.

While visual narratives connect the experiences of moving across transnational urban spaces to the practices of moving through, seeing and picturing everyday urban spaces they also provide opportunities for observation, reflection and transformation of migrants' mobilities. They bridge across spaces of transnational migration, urban mobilities and embodied experiences of the global city by encouraging participants to take affective charge of their mobilities. They make telling points about the experience of coming to and moving through foreign urban space and about the persistence of categories of near/far, home/abroad, migrant/other.

Examining the city through the visual narratives of migrants, then, opens up a diversity of spaces for reading, experiencing and narrating the city which are multiple and often contradictory, but which illustrate ways of making connections between the spaces and places of migrant pasts, presents and futures. These narratives are not

authentic representations of transnational urban spaces; rather, they work as prompts to bring into 'view' (both conversationally and visually) those spaces in migrants' everyday lives from which the researcher is largely excluded. And these narratives can only be understood in the context of the researcher-participant relationship. While photographing the global city has been a highly aestheticised practice, participant-directed photographs construct a different version of the global city: one that is mundane, ordinary and relevant and one that is constructed through its relation to migrants' personal histories and their affective landscapes of mobility and migration.

## Note

1. The eight countries were Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia and Hungary. Rights given to them to live and work in the UK were conditional upon them registering with the UK Home Office on arrival.

## Funding Statement

The author wishes to thank the Suntory Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines at the London School of Economics for the New Researcher Grant awarded to the author, without which this research could not have been carried out.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express heartfelt gratitude to the participants who kindly devoted their time patiently answering questions and taking pictures. Thanks also to Katherine Brickell, research assistant, and Magdalena Maculewicz, Polish translator, for their valuable contributions towards the fieldwork. Finally, the author's gratitude extends to Andy Cumbers and the four anonymous referees for their helpful and insightful comments without which this paper would not have been completed. Any other omissions or mistakes are the author's own.

## References

- Becker, H. S. (1995) Visual sociology, documentary photography, and photojournalism: it's (almost) all a matter of context, *Visual Studies*, 10(1), pp. 5–14.
- Biemann, U. (2004) Touring, routing and trafficking female geobodies: a video essay on the topography of the global sex trade, in: T. Cresswell and G. Verstraete (Eds) *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*, pp. 71–85. London: Rodopi.
- Brickell, K. and Datta, A. (Eds) (2011) *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Burrell, K. (2008) Materialising the border: spaces of mobility and material culture from post-socialist Poland, *Mobilities*, 3(3), pp. 331–351.
- Crang, M. (1996) Envisioning urban histories: Bristol as palimpsest, postcards, and snapshots, *Environment and Planning A*, 28(3), pp. 429–452.
- Crang, M. (1997) Picturing practices: research through the tourist gaze, *Progress in Human Geography*, 21(3), pp. 359–373.
- Crang, M. (2002) Rethinking the observer: film, mobility and the construction of the subject, in: T. Cresswell and D. Dixon (Eds) *Engaging Film: Geographies of Mobility and Identity*, pp. 13–31. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- CRE (Commission for Racial Equality) (2007) *Ethnic minorities in Great Britain*. Commission for Racial Equality Factfile 2 ([http://www.cre.gov.uk/downloads/factfile02\\_ethnic\\_minorities.pdf](http://www.cre.gov.uk/downloads/factfile02_ethnic_minorities.pdf)).
- Datta, A. (2008) Building differences: material geographies of home(s) among Polish builders in London, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33(4), pp. 518–531.
- Datta, A. (2009) Places of everyday cosmopolitanisms: east European construction workers in London, *Environment and Planning A*, 41(2), pp. 353–370.
- Datta, A. (2011) The translocal city: belonging and otherness among Polish migrants after 2004, in: K. Brickell and A. Datta (Eds) *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections*, ch. 5. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Dodman, D. R. (2003) Shooting in the city: an autophotographic exploration of the urban environment in Kingston, Jamaica, *Area*, 35, pp. 293–304.
- Emmison, M. and Smith, P. (2000) *Researching the Visual: Images, Objects, Contexts and Interactions in Social and Cultural Inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Farrar, M. (2005) Photography: making and breaking racialised boundaries: an essay in reflexive, radical, visual sociology, *Sociological Research Online*, 10(1).
- Harper, D. (2002) Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation, *Visual Studies*, 17(1), pp. 13–26.
- Haywood, K. M. (1990) Visitor-employed photography: an urban visit assessment, *Journal of Travel Research*, 29(1), pp. 25–29.
- Hirsch, J. (1981) *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Home Office (2009) *Accession monitoring report May 2004–March 2009* ([http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/reports/accession\\_monitoring\\_report/report-19/may04-mar09?view=Binary](http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/aboutus/reports/accession_monitoring_report/report-19/may04-mar09?view=Binary); accessed 11 February 2010).
- Kindon, S. (2003) Participatory video in geographic research: a feminist practice of looking?, *Area*, 35(2), pp. 142–153.
- Latham, A. (2003) Research, performance, and doing human geography: some reflections on the diary-photograph, diary-interview method, *Environment and Planning A*, 35(11), pp. 1993–2017.
- Latham, A. and McCormack, D. P. (2009) Thinking with images in non-representational cities: vignettes from Berlin, *Area*, 41(3), pp. 252–262.
- Ley, D. (2004) Transnational spaces and everyday lives, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 29, pp. 151–164.
- Markwell, K. (2000) Photo-documentation and analyses as research strategies in human geography, *Australian Geographical Studies*, 38, pp. 91–98.
- McKay, D. (2006) Translocal circulation: place and subjectivity in an extended Filipino community, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 7(3), pp. 265–278.

- Pink, S. (2007) *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. London: Sage.
- Rabikowska, M. and Burrell, K. (2009) The material worlds of recent Polish migrants, in: K. Burrell (Ed.) *After 2004: Polish Migration to the UK in the 'New' European Union*, pp. 211–232. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Rose, G. (2007) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Interpreting Visual Materials*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.
- Sontag, S. (1973) *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sweetman, P. (2009) Revealing habitus, illuminating practice: Bourdieu, photography and visual methods, *The Sociological Review*, 57(3), pp. 491–511.
- Thomas, F. (2007) Eliciting emotions in HIV/AIDS research: a diary-based approach, *Area*, 39(1), pp. 74–82.
- Tolia-Kelly, D. (2004) Materializing post-colonial geographies: examining the textual landscapes of migration in the South Asian home, *Geoforum*, 35(6), pp. 675–688.